

LEAN

BY
MRS. NEWMAN.



AUTHOR OF
TOO LATE



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J E A N

VOL. I.



JEAN

BY MRS. NEWMAN

AUTHOR OF

‘TOO LATE’

‘FOR LOVE IN SEQUEL WORKS WITH FATE’

IN TWO VOLUMES

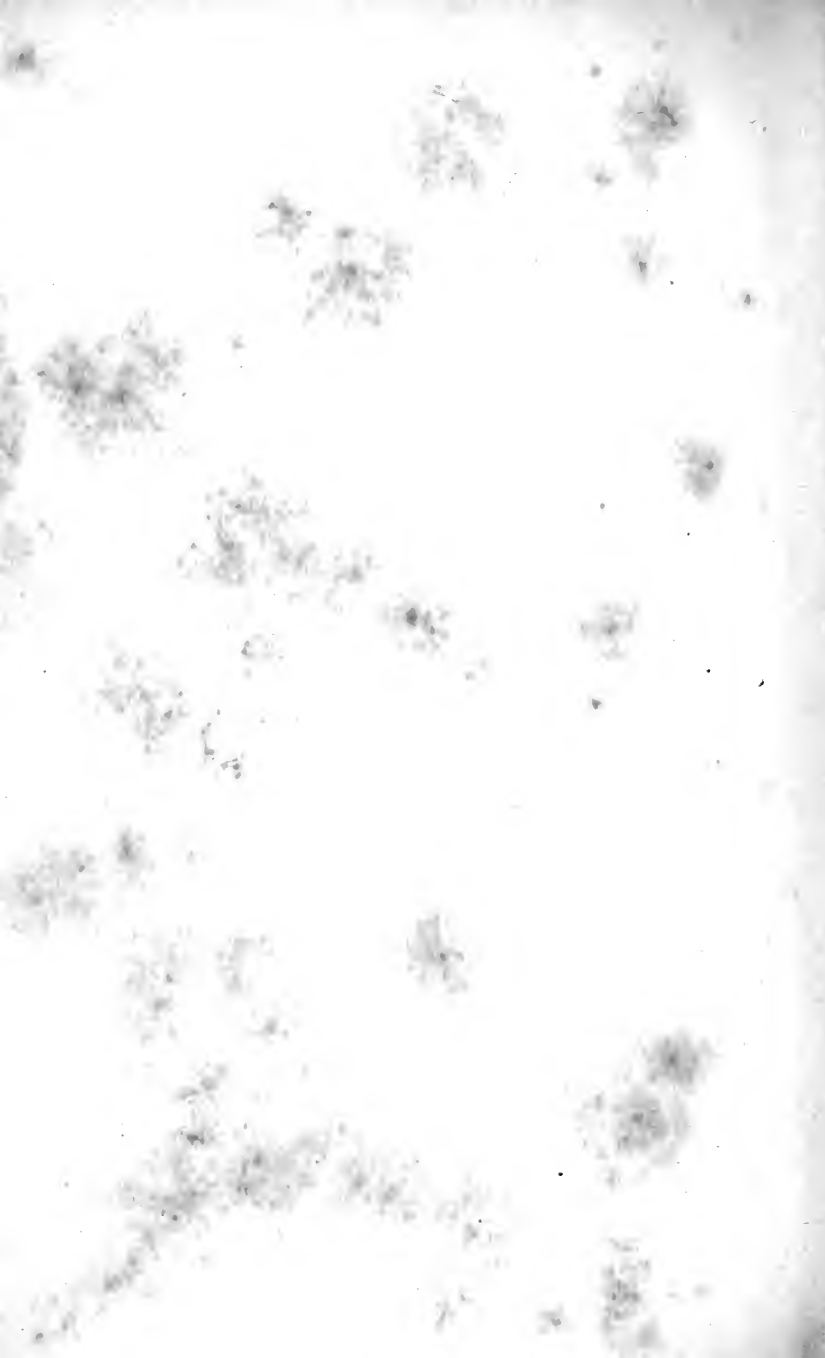
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JEAN.

CHAPTER I.

THE POYNDERS.

'Not bills, I hope, Louis?' said Mrs. Poynder, glancing uneasily at some large blue envelopes on the table by her son's plate, as she entered the pretty breakfast-room at Fernside. A slight, gentle-looking widow, of about fifty years of age, with very few traces of bygone prettiness in her careworn face, followed by her daughter, a fair, graceful, distinguished-looking girl of about five-and-twenty. They belong to the upper middle class, and, to judge by appearances, possess ample means for keeping up their position.

Visitors at Fernside, a pretty cottage, situated on the outskirts of a small town in Cambridgeshire, and facing a wide stretch of pleasant heath, give Mrs. Poynder credit for living much within

her means. There is no mystery about her antecedents. The Dean, her father, had been well known in Raystone, as also had been her husband, the late Dr. Poynder, who was tutor and fellow of his college before his marriage, and afterwards held a good living in the vicinity of his former labours. Mrs. Poynder is said to have inherited a good fortune from both her father and husband, and her humility in choosing to live at Fernside when she might have had the best house in Raystone is very much admired. If she has not the best house she is in the best society. To be well received at Fernside is the Raystone test of gentility. Many an anxious mother of her acquaintance envies Mrs. Poynder, as one exempt from the cares and troubles of ordinary mortals. Her daughter is the acknowledged beauty of Raystone, and her intelligence said to be as much above the ordinary standard as her beauty. Her son was in the best set at the University (his having made no mark there is looked upon as a matter of choice); and, well off as she now is, everybody knows there is a large fortune to come from a bachelor brother in India. In fine, she appears to be one of the very few who draw no blanks in the lottery of life.

Louis Poynder, a tall, well-built, and, of a certain type, fine-looking young man of about seven-and-twenty, opened one after the other the enve-

lopes by his side, glanced at their contents with lowering brows, thrust them into the pockets of his morning-coat, and turned towards his mother.

‘Isn’t there a letter due from the old man now, mother?’

She sighed. ‘I wish you would not depend so much upon them, Louis. There was no positive promise to go beyond college expenses, you know; and if——’

‘What’s that under one?’ he impatiently broke in, indicating one amongst two or three others by her own plate. ‘Isn’t it—— Yes, there it is! open it—quick—there’s a good *mater*, and let us know how much this time.’

Maude Poynder set down her cup and fixed her eyes upon her mother. The colour in Mrs. Poynder’s cheeks was a little heightened. She broke the seal with trembling fingers. She had her own special reasons for anxiety respecting the contents of this Indian letter. She read a few lines, and then let the paper fall into her lap, every vestige of colour dying out of her face as she sat staring at her children with blank, despairing eyes.

‘What is it?’

‘What does he say?’ they ejaculated, in some surprise.

‘He says——’ She glanced at the letter again to make sure she had read aright. ‘Oh, Louis—

Maude—my poor children! your uncle has been married for years, and has a grown-up daughter!’

‘Disgusting old hypocrite!’

‘It cannot be true. Are you sure it is uncle’s handwriting? Let me look, mamma.’ Maude took the letter from her mother’s nerveless fingers and read it slowly through, her voice sinking into a whisper as she concluded:—

“My dear Maria,—Such news as I have to communicate is best told as concisely as possible; especially since I must ask you to excuse my not giving any explanation respecting the cause of my having hitherto been silent upon the subject. You will doubtless be very much surprised to hear that I was married seventeen years ago, and that I have a daughter just sixteen, who has resided in England since her earliest childhood. I lost my wife, under circumstances upon which I cannot enlarge, a year after the child’s birth, and as quickly as possible sent the latter to a better climate. She was placed at school, and given to understand that the better her progress there the better it would be for herself, since she would have to depend upon her own exertions for a livelihood: which it was my intention, until latterly, she should do. For reasons I cannot explain I have now altered my plans, and trust that you will be

willing to co-operate with me. To that end I offer you five hundred a year to take the girl into your family and treat her as your niece and my heir, which she will be. She has hitherto been known under the name of Bell—Jean Bell; but she will now resume her rightful one of Raymond. According to the schoolmistress's annual reports to my solicitor the girl has fair abilities, and has progressed tolerably well with her studies. Her character and disposition I of course know nothing about. I have written to Jean by this mail, and my solicitor, Mr. Farrar, will arrange with Miss Bowles, whose address I enclose, for her departure from Ivy Lodge as soon as it may be convenient to you to send for or fetch her. I trust that you and her cousins will do your best to give Jean a comfortable home until my return to England, which will be at no distant date, this climate beginning to tell upon me at last. Farrar will hand over to you the first half-year's instalment; also two hundred a year to Jean for her own spending. With my love and best wishes for yourself and boy and girl,

“Your affectionate brother,

“OLIVER RAYMOND.

“P.S.—Louis appeared to have some natural ability, and ought to have done better at college. It was a fair launch for him, and he ought now to

be making his way. If, on my return, I find him steadily at work, I may give him a little further help ; but he must not depend upon it.” ’

There was dead silence. Each saw a fair castle crumble into ruins—a castle built out of the wealth which was to go to this stranger. Mrs. Poynder was very far from being as well off as she had the credit for being, and she was beginning to feel that she was not really the richer for her brother’s large gifts. Left with two children and a small income, she had commenced her widowed life frugally enough ; grateful for a little occasional help from her brother, without depending upon it. But, as years passed on and the remittances became more frequent and of larger amount, she had come to take them more as a matter of course. It was natural enough that she should do so.. Oliver Raymond was her only brother ; acknowledged to having amassed great wealth (when large fortunes were made by enterprising men in the Indian civil service), and was supposed to have no domestic ties of his own. Then he had always shown so much interest in his sister’s affairs, and seemed to give what he gave in such a matter-of-course way, indirectly encouraging her to think that her children would be his heirs, as, indeed, he had intended them to be. If

Mrs. Poynder occasionally made some feeble protest against her children depending too much upon their uncle's wealth she in her heart never doubted their succeeding to it. His very generosity, leading them, as it had, to believe that the supply would never fail, and cultivate their tastes accordingly, seemed almost cruel now. 'Even the allowance of four hundred a year for her son's college expenses, had only encouraged the boy to form expensive tastes,' thought the poor mother. If they had known there would be no more than her poor three hundred a year to depend upon, of course her children would have grown up very differently. What in the world would they do, Louis and Maude, with their expensive habits and tastes? Even if this daughter proved amiable and easy to get on with, and the five hundred a year was likely to continue, it would be less than they had been accustomed to receive from her brother. The total of many a previous year had far exceeded the sum now offered in such a business-like way as an equivalent for his daughter's maintenance. Then poor Mrs. Poynder's heart sank at the recollection of two or three house-keeping bills which must shortly be met, and which she had depended upon her brother's bounty to meet. Although Fernside was called a cottage, and was unpretending enough from

an external point of view, she prided herself upon its internal refinement. All the minutiae of their daily life had gradually become more refined and luxurious as year by year her brother's remittances duly arrived and increased in amount. She was beginning to have grave suspicions that four hundred a year had not paid her son's expenses at college; she could not but notice that tradesmen's letters to him were increasing in number, and that his uneasiness was increasing in proportion. Poor Maude, too, how terribly hard this was for her! The dear child naturally liked to look the same as other girls in her own position in society, and milliners were so very exorbitant in their charges!

Maude Poynder stood gazing out of the window, an expression in her fair face which a few moments previously it would have appeared incapable of taking. Whatever her reflections, she was the first to recover self-control. Resuming her seat at the breakfast-table, she quietly said:

‘You will take her, of course, mamma?’

‘We cannot refuse the money, dear.’

‘No.’

‘And after all five hundred a year will do a great deal, you know, dears,’ said Mrs. Poynder, hastily doing a little mental sum in addition as she looked anxiously at her children.

Her son shrugged his shoulders a little contemptuously.

‘What can you give me to tide over the present with, mother?’

‘I am afraid very little, if anything, Louis,’ nervously replied Mrs. Poynder. ‘My next dividends are all due for—for housekeeping. And you know you begged so hard for the last hundred, that I could not pay Maude’s bills.’

‘She’s awfully extravagant.’

Maude smiled, took up the offending letter, and slowly went through it again, carefully weighing each sentence as she read it.

‘You must “sell out” two or three hundreds for me, mother; it won’t make much difference in your income, you know,’ pleaded Louis to his mother, in an undertone. ‘It’s so deuced hard—so unexpected, coming upon a fellow like this.’

Mrs. Poynder made no reply, glancing uneasily towards her daughter. Maude put down the letter, and said, in her usual low, sweet, even tone :

‘There is some mystery about “the girl,” as he terms her. He has evidently been for some reason prejudiced against her, and has only just made up his mind to take her into favour. The change of name, too!’ She reflected a few

moments, and then added, 'Yes, it might have been worse. Better she should be here than anywhere else.'

Mrs. Poynder's face brightened, and she looked admiringly at her daughter. Dear Maude was so clever and clear-headed, so self-possessed in any emergency!

'Yes, of course it is, dear; and we must try to make the best of it.'

'The best won't be anything very bright,' said her son, impatiently. 'Even Maude's fine intelligence cannot make black white.'

'I do not mean to attempt it,' quietly returned his sister. 'I shall content myself with making the most of the material that comes to hand, black or white.'

'Your uncle says I am to fetch her,' hastily put in Mrs. Poynder, always a little nervous when it came to crossing swords between Maude and her brother. The latter gathered up his papers and quitted the room. What he had to say to his mother must be said out of his sister's hearing.

'Of course you will use your own judgment about that, mamma.'

Mrs. Poynder's eyes asked what her own judgment was to be; and, quite accustomed to

such appeals, her daughter promptly replied, 'If she is inclined to think much of herself, your going might make her think more, perhaps, and that would not be the best beginning for us. At present we have no clue whatever to her character. Write a pleasant note telling her about your neuralgia—you are always liable to it, you know—and begging her to come to us as soon as possible. We will meet her at the station, if she lets us know her train.'

'Yes, dear ; yes, of course that would be best. I will write at once,' said Mrs. Poynder, rising from her seat with alacrity.

'And, mamma, there is really no necessity to take people into our confidence—about your receiving her here, and what Uncle Oliver says about leaving her his money. He *may* change his mind again, you know.' A soft rosy tint covered her cheeks as she went on. 'Louis is so deficient in tact ! Couldn't you point out to him that Nugent need not know ? Tell him it will be wiser, for his own sake, to say no more than that you are going to give your niece a home with us. You will not forget the words, dear—give your niece a home with us ?'

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'I will remember; and indeed I think you are quite right—there really is no necessity to

say more.' Then, with an anxious, enquiring look at her daughter, 'I thought Nugent was very marked in his attentions last night, Maude dear?'

'Did you?' sweetly replied Maude. But she said no more, and her mother did not venture to question further.

CHAPTER II.

JEAN.

It was the recreation-hour—between breakfast and nine o'clock study—at Ivy Lodge. Miss Bowles entered the room in which her pupils were gathered, laughing and talking away the time in schoolgirl fashion, with the morning's letters in her hand. There was immediate silence, all eyes turning with eager expectancy towards her as she proceeded to distribute them.

'The Miss Laytons, Julia and Kate, Miss Thornton, Miss Emily Gerrard,' read Miss Bowles—ah, how slowly! to the ears of the impatient girls—placing a letter in each outstretched hand; 'Miss Tyndale, Miss Bell—Miss Bell.' Miss Bowles peered curiously down through her eye-glass at the address, to be quite sure she had read aright; then looked across the room to where sat a young girl bending over a book, and repeated, in a slightly-raised voice, 'Miss Bell.'

Half-suppressed whisperings and titterings

‘Do open it and tell us, Jean. It is sure to be something wonderful!’

‘It’s a love-letter from old Tommy West.’

‘It’s a bill for sweets.’

‘No, she has turned out to be a rich princess, and a fairy godmother is coming to fetch her away in a gold coach.’

‘Do tell us, Jean.’

Jean tossed the letter towards them. ‘Find out for yourselves!’ Then she went back to her corner, took up her book again, and sat with her head bent over it.

Little Rose Wylee picked up the letter and carried it to Jean. ‘It was only fun,’ she whispered, slipping it into her hand and turning away. Jean glanced furtively round. The girls had gathered about the fortunate recipients of letters, who were reading out scraps of home news, and had forgotten her. She tenderly smoothed out the crushed letter—her own letter—the only one she had ever received—glanced shyly round again, opened it, and began to read.

‘My dear Daughter.’ Daughter! Her heart beat wildly a moment, then stood still. It was a mistake after all! She rose from her seat, pale and quiet enough now, and passed out of the room, unheeding the laughing questions with which she was assailed. She went to Miss

Bowles' sanctum, knocked at the door, and was bidden to enter.

'It was a mistake, ma'am; the letter is not for me.'

'Sit down, Miss Bell,' absently replied Miss Bowles, who was reading a letter of her own, with a very surprised face.

The girl waited quietly, with heavy, downcast eyes.

'Most astonishing! Remarkably strange! So entirely unlooked for!' at intervals ejaculated Miss Bowles, apparently quite forgetting Jean's presence and her own habit of reticence. Presently she laid the open letter upon her lap, crossed her mittened hands upon it, and looked at Jean as Jean had never been looked at before. Astonishment, curiosity, gladness, regret, all jostled each other in Miss Bowles' face at once. But she had so long cultivated one expression that the muscles of her face refused to obey this sudden demand upon them, and the contortions her features underwent quite startled Jean as she slowly raised her eyes.

'Are you not well, ma'am?' she asked, fearing Miss Bowles was going to have a fit. 'May I get you anything?'

'No; wait here.' Then, in a measure recovering her self-control, Miss Bowles went on:

‘I have received a most astonishing communication, Miss——’ She stared at Jean a moment. ‘I am really almost at a loss how to inform you ; but if these letters are genuine—and I must say they appear to be so—your future position in life will be very different to that which you have been taught to expect. But the instructions I received respecting you have been scrupulously complied with, and therefore I cannot be held responsible for the tone of your mind and manners being more suited to one having to depend upon her own exertions for a livelihood than to a young lady with a position in society. I have conscientiously endeavoured to make you understand that you must not place yourself upon the same level as my other young ladies, who possess greater advantages.’

‘I never did,’ bluntly from Jean.

‘I am not complaining, my dear.’

Jean’s eyes opened wide. It was quite the exception for Miss Bowles not to complain, and the ‘my dear’ Jean had only heard once before, when she had been asked to assist some of the younger girls in their practising. There was a half-pathetic smile upon the girl’s face as she softly replied (not knowing what else to say), ‘Thank you.’

‘Not at all, my dear. I only regret that I was not informed of your prospects at the outset’

—and here Miss Bowles was perfectly sincere—
‘so that I might have acted differently. Have you read the letter?’

‘No, ma’am. It began, “My dear Daughter,” so I knew it was not for me.’

‘But it is for you, my dear Jean—from your papa in India.’

Jean’s hands closed tightly over the letter, and she rose from her seat white and still, her brown eyes fastened upon Miss Bowles’ face as that lady went on: ‘It appears that for some reason, which he does not explain, your papa wished you to be unaware of his existence, and trained to depend upon your own exertions for your bread. But he has now changed his mind, and desires you to take your rightful name, and leave Ivy Lodge. Your name, it appears, is Raymond; and from what I gather you will inherit a large fortune. For the present you are to reside with your aunt, Mrs. Poynder—who I happen to know is a lady very well connected indeed—and her children. But your letter will doubtless give you the details. I also have one from the solicitor who has always acted as your papa’s agent with me, confirming all that is stated in Mr. Raymond’s letter. Accept my congratulations, my dear.’

Had Jean been trained like Miss Bowles’ other young ladies she would have probably made some

little graceful speech in return ; as it was, the congratulations might as well have been unspoken.

‘ May I read this letter alone, ma’am ? ’

‘ Certainly ; I have not the least objection. But, my *dear* child, pray oblige me by re-entering and leaving the room in a more ladylike manner. How often have you heard me point out the impropriety of extreme haste ! Abrupt movements are always inelegant.’

Jean returned a few steps, curtsied to Miss Bowles, and walked slowly out of the room. Outside it elegance and propriety were forgotten. She ran swiftly up to one of the dormitories and shut herself in, locking and double-locking the door.

‘ Why, Miss Bell ! whatever is the matter ? ’ ejaculated a good-humoured-looking housemaid, who was dusting the room.

Falling upon her neck, Jean sobbed out, ‘ Oh, Sarah, I’ve got a father ! ’

‘ Got a father ! ’ echoed Sarah, who, like the rest of Ivy Lodge, looked upon Jean as a waif and a stray, whose beginning must have been somewhat like that of the memorable Topsy. She was the only one in the house who had no relation with the outside world ; to whom no letter ever came, and who had never heard a kinder word than Miss Bowles could speak. Sarah,

whose father, a drunken cabman, had been the terror of his children, went on consolingly: 'Don't take on so about it, Miss Bell, dear.'

But Jean heard her not. Sitting down upon the floor—chairs were not considered necessary in the dormitories—she was laughing and crying over her letter, almost beside herself with joy. Sarah eyed her doubtfully a few moments, and then went on with her work.

With trembling hands Jean opened her precious letter and began to read:

'My dear Daughter,—For reasons which, if it be necessary to explain at all, must not be explained upon paper, I have hitherto kept you in ignorance of my existence, and had you educated so as to be capable of earning your own bread. I may have made a mistake, but you will not, I think, be any the worse for not having been brought up as an heiress and surrounded by flatterers.' (Oliver Raymond omitted to take into account the evil which might arise from shutting out love from his daughter's life; probably because he had for many a long year tried to satisfy his own mind by scoffing at the word.) 'At any rate, I have now changed my mind respecting your future. I desire you to take your rightful name of Raymond, and to reside with your aunt, Mrs. Poynder, of Fernside, Raystone. She will be amply compensated for

taking charge of you, and your own private allowance will be two hundred a year, as befits your position as my daughter and heiress. My solicitor, Mr. Farrar, will arrange with Miss Bowles for your immediate departure, and you will hear from my sister upon the subject. I shall expect a letter from you as soon as you are settled with your aunt, and hope you will write very fully. By keeping up a correspondence with you I shall hope to know a great deal more of my daughter by the time I return to England. Meantime, your affectionate father,

‘OLIVER RAYMOND.’

‘Oh, Sarah! how shall I be able to bear it? A father and aunt and cousins all at once! I’m too happy.’

‘You’ll soon get used to it, miss; people are never too happy for long together,’ philosophically returned Sarah.

Jean sat, with her elbows on her knees and her chin between her hands, trying to realise her good fortune. It was not easy to imagine herself free, and with ties like other people, after nearly fourteen dreary, colourless years at Ivy Lodge. Although surrounded by happy girls of her own age, her life had been almost as isolated as if she had been on a desert island. Miss Bowles prided herself upon her conscientiousness in obeying to the letter her instructions respecting Jean.

Moreover, as there had been always a haze about the girl's parentage, Mr. Farrar having declined any discussion upon the subject, Miss Bowles had considered it her duty to discourage anything in the shape of close companionship between Jean and her other young ladies, who, her prospectus set forth, were the 'daughters of gentlemen only.' Did there appear any tendency towards forming a friendship, the young lady, whoever she might be, was invited to a *tête-à-tête* with Miss Bowles, after which it invariably happened that Jean lost her friend. The girls were not unkind to her; but, with the careless light-heartedness of youth, accepted her inferiority as a matter of course. It was evident enough that she was different to themselves. No friends came to see her, her holidays were all spent at Ivy Lodge, and her dress was always of the cheapest and shabbiest. The general impression was that she must be a poor relation, on whom food and clothing were grudgingly bestowed out of charity. Of course she would not have had to help with the younger girls, and do so many things which others did not, if her education had been paid for. Then her dreary, loveless life prevented her from being able to enter into their feelings about the world outside Ivy Lodge; and, in her inability to picture a home and family group, she asked such absurd questions, and had such very exalted

unreal notions about the love between brothers and sisters! Added to her other deficiencies, she was not considered remarkable for amiability.

When the clock struck nine, from force of habit Jean sprang to her feet and ran down to morning study, slipping her treasure into the bosom of her frock as she ran. But, instead of seeing the pupils in their accustomed places, silently bending over their tasks, she found them laughing and chatting in high glee—no sign of study to be seen.

‘Here she is!’ they exclaimed, eagerly pressing round her as she entered the room. ‘Oh, Jean, Bowles has given us a whole holiday because of it! Do tell us if it’s true! She says you are going to be enormously rich, and that your father is a gentleman, and your aunt a dean’s daughter!’

In truth Miss Bowles had been not a little glad to be able to explain that her doubtful pupil was so respectable after all.

‘Yes; it is true.’

‘Won’t Bowles be fine to you now! Do tell us all about it!’

But Jean was shy—shyer now than they had ever known her, and so quiet; although they could tell by her shining eyes and quivering lips that it was true.

‘She says that your papa has been in India all the while, and that letter was from him.’

‘Yes; and it begins, “My dear Daughter,”’ whispered happy Jean.

‘Oh, that of course!’ their eyes eagerly asking, ‘And what next?’

But she did not appear inclined to tell, or indeed to talk at all. She could not be so suddenly on familiar terms with them as they could be with her. She had not been accustomed to exchange confidences, as were they with each other, and felt strange and awkward with them. As soon as she could she made an excuse for escaping to the dormitory again. Miss Bowles had said that to-morrow might bring a letter from her aunt. What would her aunt be like—kind and loving, like Rose Wylee’s, who gave her two kisses when she came to see her? Then she began to torment herself with doubts and fears. How if her aunt should not like her, and refuse to receive her into her home? She remembered that hitherto no one had found her worth loving, and fell into despondency lest, after all, she should be obliged to spend her life at Ivy Lodge. How terrible the prospect looked now! It had seemed dreary enough before, but to be thrust out of paradise after only one glimpse at it! Already realising the truth of Sarah’s philosophy, she passed the day in a state of anxiety almost bordering upon misery, afraid to indulge the hope that such wondrous good fortune could be really meant for

her, and yet more afraid to think of the future if it were not. The girls could not persuade her to go down and enjoy the holiday with them, though they whispered promises of all sorts of surreptitious treats. She entreated to be left alone, and spent the hours sitting on the floor in a corner of the bedroom, unheeding their laughter at Jean's method of coming into her fortune!

Miss Bowles serenely approved of Jean's woe-begone aspect, and took occasion to point out to her dear young ladies that they should remember poor Miss Bell had to leave Ivy Lodge, and naturally dreaded the separation from the friend and instructress of her youth.

At which her 'dear young ladies' declared amongst themselves that Jean was even stupider than they had given her credit for being. But she would have cared nothing about their verdict had she heard it. Her whole being was filled with one idea, and she was too abstracted to notice what was going on around her. When night came she laid her head upon her pillow in a whirl of confusion. 'Ah, the long, weary hours before morning! However should she get through them?' But the healthy reaction from a day's excitement soon set in, and she fell into a sound, dreamless sleep, from which she was only awakened by the six o'clock bell. She sprang up in bed and looked about her

with wild eyes. ‘Was it only a dream—was it?’ But she was very quickly reassured by her companions beginning once more to talk over her good fortune. She had but two hours now to wait until post-time, and they were got through at last.

Miss Bowles smilingly put a letter into her hand. ‘From your aunt, no doubt, my dear.’

Jean took it from her hand and ran off to her corner with it. It was from Mrs. Poynder :

‘My dear Niece,—A letter received this morning from my brother informs me of your relation to him and us. I hasten to write to you, very much regretting that he has not before given me the opportunity to know you. My dear children and I are longing to welcome you to our hearts and home, and trust you will lose no time in coming to us. I regret not being able to fetch you, having unfortunately been suffering from a neuralgic attack, and feeling a little afraid of the journey just now. I find there is a train due at Raystone station at four o’clock P.M., and some of us will meet it on the chance of your coming at once, which I hope you will do. With sincerest love from myself and your cousins, your affectionate aunt,

‘MARIA POYNDER.’

Miss Bowles would have much preferred a longer notice before Jean's removal. If the aunt was aware what sum had been paid with her niece she would be astonished at the shabbiness of her appearance. She had hitherto settled the matter comfortably enough with her own conscience. Had she not been warned against encouraging the girl in extravagant notions? And was she not dressed quite well enough for what was to be her station in life? Nevertheless Miss Bowles would have preferred a little more time for replenishing before Jean's wardrobe came under critical eyes. But her endeavours to persuade her 'dear young friend' to remain a few days longer at Ivy Lodge (she had left off commanding since the arrival of that Indian letter) were quite unavailing. Indeed, Jean was in so restless and excited a state—so entirely different to her usual self—that Miss Bowles was afraid of serious consequences if she were thwarted very much. So the best that could be done in a few hours was done. Such things as could be got ready-made were purchased, and Jean found herself better dressed than she could remember ever having been before, when she set forth on her journey to Raystone, accompanied as far as the railway station by Sarah, the housemaid.

CHAPTER III.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS.

‘RATHER of the gushing order, I should think, to judge from the telegram mamma received. The clerks at the office must have been highly amused.’

‘Very bad style to begin upon ; but you will get her out of all that. Schoolgirls are all more or less gushing, I suppose.’

The speakers are Maude Poynder and Nugent Orme, a visitor, evidently upon familiar terms with the household. Louis Poynder and he have known each other since their boyhood ; were together at Eton, at the same College of the University, and imagine themselves to be very much alike and fast friends. But the difference between them, so slight from the point of divergence in their boyhood, is increasing at a more rapid ratio than either is aware of. Should it come to the test they may find themselves as far asunder as the opposite poles. They are nearly the same age, and both men are considered good-looking ; but

Nugent Orme has light hair and grey-blue eyes, and his good looks are of a larger and broader type than the other's. His manner is different, too : he talks less and listens more than does Louis Poynder. But he is not so general a favourite. Apt as a boy to believe too much—his ultra-chivalric notions leading him into all sorts of Quixotic extravagance, and making him the dupe of subtler minds—he now appears to be running into quite the opposite extreme of caution and scepticism. Indeed, he seems to delight in airing his cynicism ; although he is found more indulgent towards those who attack than to those who confirm it. He is not so easy to get on with, and therefore not so generally liked, as is Louis Poynder. Young ladies complain that Mr. Orme is so hard and uncompromising. He is cynical enough himself, but becomes downright rude if another attempts a little satire. He absolutely told little Kate Graham that an irreligious woman was an abomination, when she made a jest in return for one of his own about some point of belief. Then there is another, and perhaps greater, reason for Louis Poynder being more popular with their lady friends. It has been long known that, if not engaged to Maude Poynder, Nugent Orme is on the verge of being so. Maude herself thinks he has been on the verge long enough ; but she

knows him too well to let him see that she thinks so. Why has he hesitated so long? He would have found it difficult to explain. That he admires her more than any woman he has ever seen is certain. Her fair, queenly style of beauty delights his eye, and her refined manners satisfies his somewhat ultra notions respecting her sex. Maude Poynder is always a gentlewoman in her language and bearing; and, moreover, she is an intelligent companion for an educated man, without the least assumption of superiority.

They are waiting in the pretty drawing-room of Fernside the arrival of Jean Raymond; Mrs. Poynder and her son having gone to meet her at the station.

‘I wonder what she will be like?’ mused Maude. ‘It seems so odd her coming suddenly to live upon intimate terms with us, without our having the slightest idea of what she really is! And my uncle knows as little as we do. Some mystery seems to be attached to her past history. But in any case it was right for mamma to offer her a home; indeed, I urged her to do so.’

‘I hope you will be rewarded by finding her pleasant to get on with. Companionable I am afraid there is no chance of her being. She can hardly be out of the pinafore stage of her existence; and if she were more matured it might not

be much better. To judge by their conversation, very few women have your tastes.' With a glance at the 'Quarterly' she had put down at his entrance.

A faint flush rose to her cheeks. 'I am afraid of you when you become complimentary, Nugent.' The 'Nugent' was whispered low, and her eyes were downcast, the flush spreading over her face.

'I meant something more than compliment,' he replied, gazing tenderly down upon her. 'Don't you know that I did, Maude?'

Her heart beat fast. At last! After such long waiting and watching, it had come at last!

The sound of an arrival. He drew back the hand extended to take hers. The colour faded from her face, and her eyes filled with tears of vexation. But she kept them back and forced a smile to her lips as Mrs. Poynder, her son, and Jean entered the room.

'Welcome to Fernside, my dear. Your Cousin Maude, Jean.'

Jean shyly lifted her eyes to the beautiful vision and placed her hand in the white palm extended towards her.

'Mr. Orme, my dear Jean. My niece, Nugent.'

Jean made a stiff little schoolroom curtsy to the tall figure before her, and stood nervously

plucking at the fingers of her glove, her eyes downcast.

‘Perhaps you would like to go to your room at once, my dear?’ kindly suggested Mrs. Poynder. ‘One is always glad to refresh a little after a journey.’

‘Yes, if you please, Mrs. Poynder.’

‘You must give me my proper title,’ returned the elder lady, as she led the way to the room assigned to Jean. ‘Aunt Maria, you know. Do you think you will like this room, my dear? We thought you might prefer the heath view.’

‘Oh, yes; it is quite beautiful!’ ejaculated Jean, gazing delightedly round the really pretty room, with its dainty, luxurious furniture and fine open view from the window—a large bay window, in which stood the most inviting of lounging-chairs, with a pretty writing-table and a few well-chosen books.

‘Your belongings will be brought up here immediately, my dear; and I will send one of the maids to assist you in unpacking. We dine at seven; so you will have ample time to take an hour or two’s rest before dressing.’

‘Thank you,’ murmured Jean. Then, as Mrs. Poynder was quitting the room, she timidly added, ‘Would you mind—may I kiss you, Aunt Maria?’

‘That you may, my dear!’ And Mrs. Poynder

heartily returned the shyly-offered kiss, tears springing to her eyes as Jean said, 'I have never had one before, Aunt Maria.'

Mrs. Poynder descended to the drawing-room, entering in the midst of a burst of laughter from the three standing round the fire.

'It is really too bad!' laughed Maude. 'Do call them to order, mamma.' Adding, to Nugent Orme, 'You must not think I am pleased. It is your absurd way of putting it which makes me laugh.'

'I do not see anything to laugh at,' said good-natured Mrs. Poynder. 'The poor child is only a little awkward at coming amongst strangers.'

'A *little* awkward!' exclaimed her son.

'Well, Louis, you stared at her so unmercifully, you know.'

'Who could help it, mother? I was just telling them what a queer figure she looked, stepping out of the train, curtseying, and answering our questions in copy-slips.'

'And Nugent was quite as bad,' said Maude, 'with his nonsense about bread-and-butter. You ought to take him to task, really, mamma.'

'I am afraid I must plead guilty. But the fault is in my training. I have not acquired a taste for bread-and-butter,' he said, smilingly.

'She is dark, is she not, mamma? Nice-looking, too, I thought; did not you, Nugent?'

‘No, I cannot say so; but I did not notice particularly.’

Then he took leave, and the two young men strolled towards the town.

‘Not much alike, the new cousin and Maude, are they, Orme?’ said Louis, linking his arm in the other’s.

‘Not in the slightest degree,’ very decidedly from Nugent Orme.

Maude was standing with one shapely foot upon the fender, gazing smilingly at the reflection of her fair face in the chimney-glass.

‘She is not likely to be troublesome in any way, I think, Maude, dear,’ said Mrs. Poynder, after waiting a few moments for her daughter to begin. ‘She seems quite humble and childlike. Fancy her asking if she might kiss me, and saying it was the first kiss she had ever received!’

‘I think we shall get on with her.’

At which Mrs. Poynder’s mind was set at rest. She had been more anxious about Maude’s verdict than anything besides.

When Jean came hesitatingly into the drawing-room, a few minutes before seven, she received a very pleasant welcome from the two ladies. They were both too well-bred to let her perceive their surprise at her toilette. She had done her best in the way of tacking a fresh frill in her brown

merino dress, which had formed her preparation for fête-days at Ivy Lodge. But she was conscious that, with the exception of a cap and apron, her dress was the same as that worn by the pretty maid-servant who had assisted her to unpack. What a contrast it was to her cousin's demi-toilette of blue silk, made in the latest style, open at the white throat, and so becomingly adorned with soft ruches and lace! Then the pale gold hair, how admirably it was arranged to suit the loveliness of the face! Jean quite forgot her own homeliness in her honest admiration of her beautiful cousin. Her very manifest admiration did her more service with Maude than the latter would have acknowledged even to herself.

Louis Poynder entered the dining-room as they were taking their seats at the table, and after a side-glance at the new-comer and a mental shrug at her primitive appearance, gave himself up to the business of dining, without any attempt at conversation. To Jean the dinner seemed a banquet. Miss Bowles' annual party suppers had never equalled this; indeed, they had principally consisted of the thinnest and tiniest of sandwiches and most tasteless of jellies, custards, &c., all plentifully adorned with frills and bows and artificial flowers, and accompanied by the sherry dubbed 'Curious.' The very aroma of the nice

things was new to her; whilst the flavour of the little she ate was strange and delicious to a palate accustomed only to beef and mutton dressed in the simplest way.

‘I am afraid you are not enjoying your dinner, my dear?’ kindly said Mrs. Poynder. ‘Let me send you a little of this curry?’

‘Oh, yes, indeed! I have never tasted anything so nice before; only I am not hungry,’ replied Jean.

Louis Poynder smiled.

On the whole the dinner was got through pretty well. The girl knew how to use her knife and fork, and she would get more accustomed to things in time, thought Maude.

When they returned to the drawing-room the three younger of the party gathered round the fire and began to make acquaintance; Mrs. Poynder cosying down in her favourite chair for her accustomed nap.

Maude was a great deal more successful in overcoming Jean’s shyness than was her brother. Indeed, Jean seemed in so much awe of him that at length, after two or three fruitless attempts to draw her into conversation, he said, with a comical look of annoyance—

‘Maude seems entirely to absorb you, Cousin Jean; and that is not fair, you know. If you do

not say something to me I shall think I have been unfortunate enough to have begun by making a bad impression.'

'Oh, no, indeed you have not!' she earnestly ejaculated, quite shocked he should think so. Then, with a shy smile, she added, 'It is because I don't know what to say. I never spoke to a gentleman before, except the drawing-master and the curate, and they were both old.'

At which he and his sister burst into a hearty laugh, awakening Mrs. Poynder from her nap. They explained to her, and all laughed again in chorus, Jean joining merrily in.

'You must excuse me,' presently said Louis, 'but I really cannot resist the inclination to ask what your first impression of a young man is?'

To be quite honest, Jean fixed her brown eyes on his face for a moment, then gravely replied, 'You haven't made any impression.'

'Now, really that is discouraging; the first specimen you have seen too!'

'No; I have seen a great many gentlemen at church and out walking—of course I have. I said I had not talked to one, and you have not said much to me yet, you know.'

'I shall consider that a challenge. But I am under the disadvantage of not knowing what kind of talk you prefer.'

‘I don’t know myself, because no one has ever talked to me except Miss Bowles. I don’t care for that kind much.’

‘The schoolmistress; rather flavourless, I dare say. But you had companions; and schoolgirls are not very reticent nor ignorant of what’s going on in the world.’

‘Miss Bowles’ young ladies did not talk to me,’ said Jean. ‘They did not seem to like me until it came out that I had a father, and that was only just as I was coming away.’

‘Why, what a dull, lonely life you must have led!’

‘Yes; I know now it was lonely,’ she said. ‘But it did not seem so bad at the time, till my father’s letter came.’

‘And you really know nothing of the wicked world? You must be awfully good—I shall be quite afraid of you.’

‘Because of my being good!’ laughed out Jean, her eyes dancing with merriment, and her white teeth glittering in the firelight. ‘That is because you don’t know. Miss Bowles thought I required more punishing than most girls, because of my natural defects.’

Highly amused, he went on with all sorts of absurd questions; his sister only putting in an occasional word when Jean got puzzled and appealed

to her. She was quietly making observations for future guidance.

By the time tea was brought in Louis Poynder had come to the conclusion that his endeavours to make himself agreeable to Jean this first night of her arrival (his mother's stipulation, in return for a certain sacrifice on her own part) had not been quite such hard work as he expected it to be.

Once or twice it occurred to him that, inexperienced as she was, and demure and quaint and shy as she looked, she was not quite the simpleton he had at first given her credit for being. Moreover, there was not the faintest semblance of self-consciousness or what he termed the schoolgirl coquette in her bearing. He was man of the world enough to recognise that in a very short time.

Mrs. Poynder was quite relieved to find them all getting on so well, and herself began to feel quite affectionate to Jean. She looked at the girl's lithe figure and shapely little head and hands, and thought that when she had got rid of her stiffness, and was dressed like a lady she might look like one. 'We must put you into the dressmaker's hands at once, my dear,' she said, when she and her daughter accompanied Jean to her room. 'I do not know what sum was paid to Miss Bowles for your dress, but she certainly might have chosen prettier colours, and had your things made in

better taste. 'You are to have an allowance for dress and so forth, are you not, my dear?'

'Yes, Aunt Maria, two hundred a year. Mr. Farrar this morning gave me this cheque for the first half-year in advance. Will you spend it for me, please?'

'With the greatest pleasure, my dear,' ejaculated Mrs. Poynder, her fingers closing over the welcome paper. Here was a little ready cash. Of course the bills for Jean's things could run on for a little while, until more pressing demands were settled.

CHAPTER IV.

JEAN'S LETTER.

WHAT an awakening for Jean Raymond the next morning! Aroused by some distant sound from a pleasant morning-dream, and taking it to be the usual summons at Ivy Lodge, she sprang out of bed, and began mechanically to dress before she realised what had taken place and where she was. What a contrast—this pretty room, with its bright chintz hangings, thick, soft carpet, &c., to the cold, bare dormitory to which she had been accustomed! Was ever girl so happy before? Would she ever get used to it? Kneeling down by the bedside, she tried to put words to the thankfulness that filled her heart. Then, in school girl fashion, she hurriedly got through the process of dressing, using lots of soap and cold water, and rubbing away afterwards until her face crimsoned and shone, and twisting her long, thick hair tightly and neatly about her head. Doubtful whether she ought to leave her room until she was summoned

(the ways of a household were so utterly unknown to her), she drew aside the window-curtain and peeped out at her new surroundings. Presently a maid tapped at the door with hot water and a message. Her mistress's love, and would Miss Raymond like to breakfast in her own room, or prefer joining the family at nine o'clock?

Nine! Nearly an hour! Jean looked longingly out at the heath flooded with sunlight, but was too unaccustomed to do a thing because she longed to do it to venture now. She sat down by the window and, resting her chin on her hands, let her thoughts wander whither they would. Whither they would! Not to take just a tantalising peep into dreamland, and be called away by the sound of the school-bell, but to wander amidst a garden of delights, plucking a flower here and a flower there at will. No wonder the hour passed swiftly, or that she was afterwards complimented upon her happy face when she joined her aunt and cousins, or rather they joined her, for it was nearly ten before Louis, the last of the party, made his appearance. He was not, apparently, in so good a humour or so inclined to talk as on the previous evening. His mother eyed him anxiously as he gathered up three or four large business-looking missives by his plate and thrust them unread into his pocket. Then, suppressing a sigh, and endea-

vouring to speak cheerfully, Mrs. Poynder turned to Jean.

‘You said something about writing to your father this morning, did you not, my dear?’

‘Yes, please, Aunt Maria.’

‘I please anything and everything that pleases you, my dear. We all do that.’

‘Indeed, yes,’ sweetly assented Maude. ‘I hope you will like being with us, Jean (it must be “Jean” and “Maude” between us, you know), and you must be sure to say if everything here is not quite to your satisfaction—will you not? And, mamma, I have been thinking that perhaps Jean would like to have a little independent room of her own—for writing, painting, or what not, you know, Jean. Might not the little room leading out of her bedroom be turned into a study, or, if that sounds too formidable, cosy? What do you say, Jean?’

Jean was too overwhelmed to say much. She could only murmur something about their being too good to her.

‘And whilst you are writing your letter Maude and I will go into the town and make arrangements with the milliners and people, so that your wardrobe is made more befitting my brother’s child, as quickly as possible. You will hardly know yourself when you have more becoming things,’ said Mrs. Poynder.

Then Jean was taken into the luxurious drawing-room, where the spring light was softened by Venetian blinds, and there was just fire enough in the brightly-burnished steel grate to bring out the scent of the violets arranged in tiny Sèvres baskets.

‘I thought you would prefer this to writing in the library, Jean. I do most of my letter-writing here,’ said Maude, drawing a small writing-table towards the fire, and placing a chair and footstool before it. ‘You will find foreign paper and all you require here.’ Then kissing Jean’s cheek, and begging her to give their best love to her ‘dear uncle,’ Maude left her alone.

It was a real boon to Jean to have this opportunity of pouring out her gratitude to the father to whom she owed all this. She was too much rejoiced at being acknowledged by him to give one thought to his long delay in doing it. What words could express her deep thankfulness for his love to her—to her who, it might be said, had never tasted happiness before? It was wondrous! After shedding a few delicious tears she sat down to her labour of love; and beginning with a somewhat incoherent but unmistakably sincere attempt to express her love and gratitude, she went on to give a glowing account of her newly-found aunt and cousins, and their goodness to her, not perceiving how very little it took to satisfy one

to whom kindness was strange. Dear Aunt Maria and Cousin Louis were so good and kind, and beautiful Cousin Maude so loving ! ‘ Oh, papa, dear papa, I only want *you* to be the very happiest girl in all the world. To think your hands will touch this paper whilst I am so far away ! I am kissing it again and again at the thought. But I must not forget. Miss Bowles said you wished to know what I am like, and what I know, and that I was to tell you myself everything very exactly. Dear papa, if I had thought anybody cared, how hard I would have striven to be more good and clever than I am. But indeed I will try now to make up for lost time. Miss Bowles said I had more good conduct marks last half ; and that, although far from being as even and amiable in my general behaviour as could be desired, there was certainly some slight improvement, which, taking my inherent defects into account, was to my credit. Those were as nearly the words as I can recollect. Then my general knowledge is doubtful ; French and German good ; singing and drawing and music commendable ; needlework, dancing, and deportment bad. But that is not the worst. Dear papa, I hope you will not mind much, but I am afraid I am very plain. I thought I looked quite ugly by the side of Cousin Maude, who is very beautiful. I am tall, for girls, and thin, and my hair and eyes are

a sort of yellow (she might have said gold) brown ; and I have no colour in my cheeks. But dear Aunt Maria is going to buy me some new dresses and things, and she says I shall look much better when I have more becoming clothes. And now I have to tell you what I read and think. I like history and biography best ; but I wish they would tell you more about why the things were done. I do not like bad people. No, I am sure not ; but I do wish some of the good ones were not quite so proud of their goodness, and felt more sorry for those who have faults. It is so much harder to be good when you have got a lot of inherent defects. But it was not I who tore the leaves out of "Letters of Advice to my Young Friends at School," though Miss Bowles thought I did. And if she told you about *my* "Letters of advice to my young friends from fairy-land," it was only fun, papa dear ; and Ellen Thornton need not have told, after asking me to let her read them, need she ? Indeed I did not mean anything wrong, and Miss Bowles herself nearly laughed two or three times when she was reading them ; only she said it was waste of paper and a dangerous gift ; so I had to be punished. I have read one novel—Rose Wylee left it during the holidays—and I hid myself till it was finished. It was "Kenilworth," written by Sir Walter Scott,

and the pleasure of it made me ill. The doctor said I had been over-excited; but Miss Bowles said that could not be, and I was afraid to tell her. But, dear papa, I mean to tell you everything, because your reproof would be better than other people's praise. I will try so hard to be whatever you would have me be. Dear papa, do believe it, as well as in the love of your grateful child,

‘JEAN.’

Folding her letter, and placing it in an envelope, she began to look about her and admire her surroundings again. The Fernside drawing-room could boast of something better than expensive upholstery. Mrs. Poynder's miniatures, cabinets, and collection of Sèvres and Dresden were all gems of their kind, old heirlooms in her family; and the soft French grey paper of the walls and pale rose-coloured hangings had been selected by Maude, to whose artistic taste was also due the absence of gilding or anything unbefitting a country house. Jean's eyes dwelt lovingly upon the treasures about her. What a beautiful room! How glorious to live always with these beautiful things! Would she ever get used to it?

Then, in the exuberance of her joy and youth and health, she burst into a pæan of song, whirling lightly about the chairs and tables, and clapping her hands above her head with girlish

glee. Suddenly her eyes caught the reflection in the chimney-glass of a tall figure standing near the door—Mr. Orme, to whom she had been introduced the night before. Colouring furiously, and backing against the wall, she made him a prim little curtsy, and murmured, with downcast eyes, ‘I beg your pardon,’ unable for the moment to divest her mind of the impression that some sort of punishment had to follow.

‘I ought rather to beg yours, Miss Raymond,’ he replied, with distant politeness ; approving of her demure affectation, as he mentally termed it, quite as little as her previous hoydenism. ‘Are any of the family in, do you know?’

‘No, I think not.’ Quick to note the shade of disappointment in his face, and anxious to conciliate a friend of her aunt’s, she shyly added, ‘I know my aunt and Cousin Maude have gone into the town ; but if you will wait——’

‘Thank you, no ; I shall probably light upon them somewhere.’ A *tête-à-tête* with this girl was not to be thought of. ‘Good morning, Miss Raymond.’

‘Good morning, Mr. Orme.’ Then, as he unceremoniously closed the door : ‘But you need not have looked so dreadfully shocked. If you had just found a father and aunt and cousins, and a

beautiful fairy home to live in, you might do something quite as silly.'

Nugent Orme walked slowly towards the town, and presently met Mrs. Poynder and her daughter returning home. Never had Maude appeared more attractive in his eyes. 'I have just called at the cottage,' he said, after shaking hands with them.

'Did you go in—did you see my cousin?'

'Yes; I went into the drawing-room, and found her executing a sort of wild Indian dance; but at sight of me she became the demurest of damsels, making a little prim curtsey and begging my pardon.'

'How ridiculous!'

'You will find her a rather serious undertaking, I fear,' he replied, turning to walk with them in a matter-of-course way. Indeed, his attendance upon them dated from so far back that it had come to be taken as a matter of course by everyone. The Raystone people had been accustomed to see him upon intimate terms at Fernside since his earliest boyhood; and it was well known that his mother, Lady Alice Orme, had been the friend of Mrs. Poynder's youth. Nugent Orme's father had been the head partner in the Raystone Bank—one of the richest men in the shire—and considered a very good match for the fourth daughter of a poor earl. Moreover, it had been

a love match. When Mr. Orme died, ten years after their marriage, his widow followed him to the grave a few months later, from sheer inability to exist without him, leaving their only son and heir, then six years old, to the guardianship of his father's sister, Miss Orme. The property had been carefully nursed during his minority, and on coming of age Nugent Orme succeeded to a fine estate. Unlike his friend Louis Poynder, he had acquired no expensive habits. Indeed, his aunt affirmed that he was a great deal too simple in his tastes for one in his position. His bedroom was more barely furnished than that of the meanest servant at the Grange, and vain were her endeavours to improve matters. Did she order some little luxury to be placed in his room during the day, it was sure to be found outside the door the next morning. Moreover, she was wont to deplore that her dear Nugent was too lax in his rule over his dependents, affirming that from the steward downwards they did almost as they pleased. They would have told a different story. Little as he said, every man and boy on the estate knew he had a master. There was a line beyond which they could not go, and those who appreciated a good place took good care not to attempt it. 'As long as you did your duty or even tried to do it, stupidity he wasn't hard upon, there

wasn't a better master breathing than the young squire,' said the men ; but one and all knew that shirking did not do at the Grange. Then, unmindful as Miss Orme considered him of his responsibilities, did she have one of her managing fits, and take to directing out of her province, a finger was laid on the machinery at once. But it was done so gently—almost imperceptibly—that the little lady fancied she had merely changed her own mind. If Miss Orme had a weakness (she had not the least suspicion that she had) it was for managing everybody and everything about her. Her nephew said he was completely under petticoat-government, affirming, to her great delight, that Aunt 'Jimmey' was a regular despot, and kept him under her thumb.

Miss Orme highly approved her nephew's intimacy with the Poynders, and heartily welcomed the idea that Maude would one day be his wife. She was an especial favourite of Miss Orme's. Intellectually superior as she was acknowledged to be, Maude was so gentle and pliant, so appreciative, and, above all, so ready to ask advice, which it was the delight of the little lady's heart to give ! She was in the habit of hinting to her intimate friends that dear Maude did nothing without consulting her, and quite believed that she had materially helped to form the young

girl's mind. 'Everybody knew that fitness for the training and management of children was not dear Maria's strong point.' Of late, since it had been understood that she was to be Nugent's wife, Miss Orme's efforts had been chiefly directed to fit her for the position, by giving her an insight into his character and the kind of management he required, and dear Maude had listened in the sweetest way. 'Nugent is very good, my dear; kind-hearted and generous in the extreme; still he requires management—*all* men do. It does not do to let them suspect they are being managed, of course. I have always been very careful not to let Nugent perceive that I manage him. His talking about being under my thumb is all nonsense, you know; he does not think it really, and'—(with a wise little nod)—'I take care to let him have his way in things he cares about.'

'You have so much tact and penetration—so different to many women!' would murmur admiring Maude.

'Not at all, my love, not all. I only use the talent that has been given to me.'

Maude was quite sure of an ally in Miss Orme, when an ally should be required. But she was beginning a little impatiently to ask herself when would that be? Her love for Nugent Orme had grown with her growth; from

her earliest girlhood it had been her ambition to at least seem what he most admired—in her intense desire for his approbation she had probably striven more to seem than to be. If he should not love her enough to ask her to be his wife after all! She shrank with terror from the thoughts which the bare suspicion called forth. She did not wish to do evil—she would not for evil's sake—if it was possible to find a clean path leading in the direction she wanted to go she much preferred it to a dirty one. Living a good, stainless life was both pleasanter and in better taste. As Nugent's wife she pictured herself leading the best life; dispensing hospitalities to the county; a kind and considerate mistress to her household; a benefactress to the poor, and devoted to her husband. And she did not overestimate her capabilities. Give her the desire of her heart, and all the rest would follow, and she told herself that if it were denied her circumstances, and not she, would be to blame for the consequences. Why did he not speak? She knew that he cared for her as he had never cared for any other woman, and yet how contentedly he seemed to go on from day to day, ever since his return from the University, without taking a step farther until the day of Jean's arrival; after which he slipped back into his old manner again. She

was four-and-twenty, and he three or four years older ; there was not the slightest obstacle to their union. Miss Orme would have been delighted to have her dear Maude daily listening to her sage advice, and Mrs. Poynder and her son had the gravest reasons for desiring the match.

CHAPTER V.

COULEUR DE ROSE.

JEAN had been three weeks in her new home, and was still in a state of wonder and delight at her good fortune. She found herself welcomed and made much of by her newly-found relatives in a way she had hardly dared to hope for. Mrs. Poynder had in her own mind formed a very agreeable plan for settling all difficulties and preventing her brother's money from being diverted into a fresh channel. Even Maude smiled her approval of the idea, and the happy mother was in a state of complacent good humour. Whether she had given her son a hint or he had arrived at the conclusion unaided, he had quite recovered the first shock of disappointment about his uncle's change of plan, and was taking matters very philosophically. If Jean had only been more like a certain Jessie his fate would have been all the easier to accept. But blue eyes and golden hair

and fascinating ways were not all that was necessary to his happiness.

So, instead of an interloper, Jean found herself a welcome and petted inmate of Fernside. Her aunt and cousins seemed anxious to gratify her lightest wish. She drank deep of the cup that was offered her, never for a moment doubting its being offered in love, and it was perhaps natural enough that one so unaccustomed should be a little over-stimulated by the draught. What cared she now for that disagreeable Mr. Orme, who seemed to delight in turning all she said into ridicule? What was there to laugh at in her replying a little doubtfully, 'Are you indeed?' when Miss Joscelyn said she was longing to know more of her? Of course she was surprised, because Miss Joscelyn had not seemed to like her at first.

'Do you think there is anything to laugh at, Maude?'

'Nugent is amused at your having taken Miss Joscelyn's little effusive speech so literally, Jean,' replied Maude, repressing her own inclination to laugh. 'Such things are said as matters of course, and it is usual to reply in the same strain.'

'What ought I to have said, then, Maude?'

'One usually replies, "You are very kind," or something in that way, to a little *politesse* of that sort, my dear Jean.'

‘But if she did not mean it, it was not very kind. What nonsense to say she was longing to know me only out of politeness!’

Maude slightly raised her eyebrows, glancing smilingly at Nugent Orme.

He was looking amusedly at Jean. ‘You will get the credit for being a very severe as well as satirical young lady, if you bring people to book about meaning all they say, Miss Raymond.’

‘Satirical!’ Jean gazed speculatively at him for a moment. ‘You are satirical. No, I do not want to be that.’

He laughed out gleefully as a schoolboy, exchanging a glance with Maude, who said, trying to look grave—

‘Mr. Orme is not accustomed to young ladies who have only just left school, so you must excuse him, Jean.’

‘Oh, yes, of course. I only wish he would excuse me sometimes—when I make mistakes, you know—instead of laughing at me.’

‘A fair retort, Miss Raymond. I assure you I feel almost extinguished.’

Jean cast a half-puzzled, half-angry look at him as she took up her book, again hardly able to prevent herself telling him in so many words that it would in no way distress her if he were extinguished altogether. But he seemed to read her very

thoughts (poor Jean ! she did not know how very transparent they were), and laughed out more amusedly than before, trying to get her to attack him again by asking her all sorts of absurd questions. But she only flashed an angry look at him for reply. Why was he always trying to ridicule her like this ? If he were only half as pleasant to be with as was Louis ! How very different Louis was ! He never made fun of her or said anything unkind when she did the wrong things. ‘Dear Louis ! how nice he is !’ she thought. ‘Aunt Maria is quite right in saying he is always doing something kind and considerate, for he really is.’

She felt more at home with Louis than even with Maude, good as the latter was. He was getting more like a dear brother every day. How kind of him to think of getting the new poem for her (she did not know that it was put down to his mother’s account), and how kind to be always trying to amuse her when they were *en tête-à-tête*. She expanded more when alone with him than she had done with anyone else, telling him all her troubles in the matter of etiquette or what not.

‘Oh, Louis, I am so glad you’ve come ! do sit here.’—‘Here’ being a chair beside the stool upon which she was sitting before the fire, embracing her knees in schoolgirl fashion. ‘I want you to tell me, please.’

‘Etiquette again?’

‘What ought I to have said when Annie’s brother asked me if I would dance with him at the ball? I said, “Yes, if you please,” but I saw that was wrong in a minute by the look of his face. Isn’t it tiresome not to know such little things? What do girls say to you when you ask them to dance, Louis?’

He looked down amusedly and a little admiringly into the clear brown eyes.

‘Well, if they want to dance they generally say, “Most happy.”’

‘“Most happy.” And if they don’t want to they say, “No, thank you,” I suppose?’

‘No, not precisely; they contrive to be engaged, I believe.’

‘Get some one else to dance with them?’

‘Of course a lady could not ask a gentleman, child. They say they are engaged, and trust to fate to bring it true, I expect.’

‘Oh! How much easier it seems for people who understand etiquette to get out of things, does it not? It must be very useful to know—sometimes.’ Then, with her chin in hand, gazing musingly into the fire, she went on: ‘I wonder if I said the right thing to him?’

‘To whom, Jean?’

‘Mr. Graham, when he said a waltz with me would be *divine*.’

‘What did you say, Jean?’ asked Louis Poynder, bending a little lower, to get a better view of her face.

‘Well, I get so laughed at myself, you know—Mr. Orme is always turning what I say into ridicule—that I can feel for others. So I pretended not to notice the silliness about *divine*, and said he might have two waltzes if he liked.’

He laughed. ‘Graham intended it for a compliment, child. With a good partner and good music a waltz may have something *divine* in it.’

‘Do you think so, Louis dear, really?’ opening wide her brown eyes. I never found anything *divine* in it at Ivy Lodge. Dancing never used to comfort me a bit.’ Her thoughts reverting to the dreary dancing lessons at that establishment, when she had always been paired with the least advanced pupil.

‘I can only say that I should prefer you to any other girl I know to waltz with,’ he said, gazing admiringly down into her face. For the moment Jessie was forgotten, and he believed what he said.

‘Ah, that is because you like me and I feel the same to you; but there would be nothing *divine* in it!’

‘I don’t see why there shouldn’t. Wait till you’ve tried a waltz with me.’

She gazed straight before her a moment ; then replied very decidedly—

‘No, nothing I feel could be intensified into a *divine* pleasure by waltzing ; I am sure of it, Louis ; and—I should not like it to be.’

‘If you attain the end what does it matter about the means, little Puritan ?’

He could not but be touched by the nature that was day by day unfolded to him. He was not a little astonished, too, that any human being could afford to let her thoughts be seen as were hers. He frequently found it rather difficult to talk to her. When he tried a compliment his *amour propre* was offended by her accepting it as a jest, and laughingly giving him a more extravagant one in return ; and when he tried a little sentiment she shut her eyes and begged him to go on, that she might fancy it was the knight in the poem who was saying it. It was all very well sometimes ; but the taste which has been fed upon highly-seasoned dishes does not readily accustom itself to more simple fare, though the latter may be known to be more healthful ; and Louis Poynder still occasionally solaced himself with visits to the vivacious Jessie.

‘Pretty Jessie,’ as she was called by her nu-

merous admirers, brought a great deal of business to her employer, the Raystone pastrycook—a pink-and-white-complexioned, black eyebrowed young lady, whose manners matched her vivid style of beauty, and who did not keep the brains of her admirers on the stretch to talk to her. Louis Poynder admired her more than any woman he had ever met. But he was experienced enough to know that young ladies like Jessie do not make the least expensive wives, and have quite as much contempt for love in a cottage as have other people.

He would have to settle down respectably by-and-bye and marry Cousin Jean. After all, things might have been worse. Jean was a nice sort of girl in her way, and not bad-looking, now she wore more becoming things, though not, of course, to be for a moment compared with Jessie. Graham evidently admired her and Lawrence, besides one or two others who had passed a favourable verdict respecting her. Of course he could take his time about it; and, if by-and-bye, when they were married, he found his chain drag a little, it would be easy enough to make his escape for a while by running up to London. None knew better than Louis Poynder how to find amusement according to his taste.

Meanwhile, he was making his way with Jean

in a leisurely sort of manner, and never had a moment's doubt of his success—when it should suit him to hasten matters she would be ready enough to meet him. Mrs. Poynder did her best to help him. She was continually sounding her dear Louis's praises in the young girl's ear, and Maude was as interested about it as she could be about anything just now, when smiles and sweetness cost her so much, enduring as she was the heart-sickness of hope deferred. When would Nugent speak the two or three words which were all that was needed now to make things sure? Perhaps it would come about at the Lawrences' party. There would be ample opportunity then, she thought, though she presently remembered, with a sigh, that opportunity had not been lacking before.

It was Jean's first ball—her first introduction into society—and she highly amused the others by her speculations about it.

'I do hope I shall do the right things, dear Aunt Maria. I know now what to say when I am asked to dance; and Louis says I must try not to seem to like it very much or look astonished at anything.'

'He meant that it is not considered well-bred to be demonstrative in any way, my dear.'

'Yes; I will try to remember.'

As though to fill her cup of pleasure to over-

flowing, letters from India arrived on the morning of the ball. Jean's satisfied even her large appetite for such food. In truth her father's heart had been touched by his child's letter. Love was beginning again to put forth buds in Oliver Raymond's heart, and perhaps the best evidence of it was his avoidance of any allusion to money (so long his ruling passion) in his letter to his daughter. It told only of his approval of her writing frankly to him; his desire for their reunion, and hope that she would be a comfort to his old age; his intention to wind up his affairs and return to the old country as shortly as possible, &c.; ending with what was intended to be a dry little jest about his regret at her having turned out plain. His letter to his sister was more businesslike, informing her that he was going to take immediate steps to have his will prepared, and that his property, bringing in something like four thousand a year, would be left to his daughter, less a provision of three hundred a year for his sister during her lifetime. Under other circumstances Mrs. Poynder would have been inclined to question her brother's justice; but, as she told her son, 'It will be all yours, you know, Louis, and dear Maude will not require anything. Nugent is rich enough to be independent about her bringing him anything.' Could the

veil have been lifted from the future for them at that moment !

Many eyes were turned upon the slight girlish figure, simply attired in white, with deep-red roses in her hair, who entered the Lawrences' drawing-room with the Poynder party. Pale with excitement, her brown eyes shining like stars, her sensitive lips quivering in her efforts to suppress her emotion, she clung to her aunt's arm, looking at the scene for a moment in dumb amazement. The dancing was to take place in the conservatory, running the width of the house, parallel with the drawing-room, which opened into it. The coloured lamps, rare exotics, and marble statuary formed a pretty enough picture. To Jean's unaccustomed eyes it was a fairy region of delight. Entirely forgetting her lessons upon etiquette, she ejaculated, 'How beautiful ! Oh, Aunt Maria, did you ever see anything so beautiful before ?'

Many looked surprised, and a half-envious sigh escaped two or three veterans as they noted her girlish enthusiasm. Enthusiasm was not the thing, to be sure ; but the wonder was that anyone could feel it in these days, when it is difficult to find a new sensation for a child's party. A girl of ten years would have considered it *infra dig.* to show such astonishment had she been capable of feeling it. But, although they could not understand

how she had managed to retain it, a few envied the young girl her freshness.

‘Can *naïveté* be coming in again?’ wondered a languid-looking young lady, eyeing Jean. ‘It almost looks like it, her being with the Poynders. They would not encourage bad style.’

Faded little Mrs. Talbot, who could not forget that she had once been pretty and led the Raystone fashions, lifted her thin shoulders and hinted to a friend that Mrs. Poynder’s *protégé* seemed quite unaccustomed to the position she found herself in. But, on the other side, there was old General Markham telling his friend ‘it did one good to see a girl able to enjoy herself in these days.’ Even Nugent Orme looked a little curiously at the animated face; but his eyes soon turned to refresh themselves upon the fair, distinguished Maude—a quiet contrast to the other, in her delicate green crape dress, adorned with lilies. Then, fragile and elegant as she looked, he knew that her mental qualities were of a firmer and stronger texture than those of any other woman he had ever met. Yes, he felt that she was the only woman he should ever care to make his wife. He had been telling himself that for the last half-dozen years, and yet he was partly conscious that he felt very little desire to hasten the event. He knew that he was daily and hourly committing himself to marrying her. He had not

the slightest wish to avoid doing so, and yet he let the time slip away without ratifying the engagement. Moreover, he made the great mistake of supposing that his ladylove's feelings upon the matter were not any warmer than his own. They were not either of them given to sentiment or romance—that was it. Nugent Orme believed himself quite realistic, looking down upon everything in the shape of romance. Had she only known it, the slightest impetus on her side would have caused the words she longed to hear to be spoken. But she knew how fastidious he was upon many points, and was afraid to venture.

‘How well you look to-night!’ he said, bending his eyes admiringly upon her. ‘All that soft green stuff and the silver things suit you admirably. Your milliner must be quite an artist. Had Undine in her mind, and perceived your fitness to represent her, I fancy.’

‘I do not think Miss James is poetic enough to idealise her customers to that extent,’ replied gratified Maude. It was so unusual for him to notice dress. ‘But I am glad you approve her taste,’ she added, with a little mental smile at the idea of trusting Miss James to select what she should wear. In truth none better understood the art of dressing than did Maude Poynder, and none knew better how to conceal the knowledge. She never

talked dress but to her dressmaker, and only that person knew how much she studied it. Her exquisitely becoming toilettes were more suggestive than obtrusive, and only one very experienced in such matters would have suspected that she had given any thought to them. Had she now been in a company of strangers she would at once have been voted the belle of the evening. But poor Maude was under the disadvantage of having been for ten years the beauty of Raystone, and a beauty of ten years' standing has ceased to astonish. Her reign was still undisputed. Girls knew that, wear what they would, they could never look like Maude Poynder. Nevertheless, many of her own age found themselves happy wives and mothers, whilst she remained single.

To Jean's surprise she had scarcely sat down by her aunt's side when she found herself surrounded by gentlemen eagerly soliciting her hand for the forthcoming dances. She delightedly gave them her tablets to fill up as they chose, and when they disagreed amongst themselves as to who was to have which, frankly informed Edward Lawrence, who appealed to her, that it did not matter in the least—it was all the same to her. Louis Poynder came up only just in time to put in his claim and rescue her for a couple of dances before she was whirled off in a galop by one of her partners. He

had not considered it necessary to make so sure as to name any precise dances they were to have together beforehand, and was not a little surprised to find her caught up in this way. But he was a little gratified too. It gratified him to know that the woman he intended to make his wife found favour in other men's eyes. Still he was puzzled to account for it. There were girls in the room handsomer a deal than Cousin Jean, and her manners certainly did not come up to the regulation pattern. It did not occur to him that the regulation pattern requires to be changed now and then, and that the present one had lasted some time. Any way, it appeared that a change was welcome. Jean's *naïve* wonder and delight had drawn the Raystone beaux about her, all eager to dance with a girl who looked as though she would enjoy it. And she did enjoy it—so thoroughly as to cause much lifting of eyebrows by those who were superior to the sensation. Mrs. Poynder was a little dismayed at her niece's too evident enjoyment, but she explained to Miss Orme and two or three other ladies that this was her dear Jean's first ball. 'She was quite a child of nature—had only just left the schoolroom'—and so forth; making excuses for her son's future wife which she would not have done for any other girl.

'Oh, how delightful it is! How much nicer

than dancing with girls!’ ejaculated happy Jean to her partner, Edward Lawrence, during a few moments’ rest in a waltz. They happened to be standing near Maude and Nugent Orme, who were calmly discussing the merits of a new pamphlet.

‘I like the tendency, which is rather Berkeleyan, and there is something very fascinating to me in the theory. But how clumsily it is advocated!’

‘Very. The critics will not have much trouble with it.’

Here Jean’s speech broke upon their ears.

‘This sort of thing must be an admirable safety-valve for that young lady’s energies,’ he said, smiling. ‘In self-defence you will have to bring her to a ball now and then.’

‘You are always so severe upon poor Jean, Nugent.’

‘I do not admire ecstatic young ladies.’

It did not improve matters in Jean’s favour when she presently joined her cousin for a few minutes.

‘Oh, Maude dear, isn’t it delightful? I can hardly bear myself for happiness!’

‘You appear to be having lots of dancing, Jean. I told you there would be no lack of partners.’

‘No; I need not have been afraid, need I? They are all so kind, too, and say such nice

things to me. Do not you care for dancing, Maude?’

‘Not very much—the round dances; but I have not been quite idle.’ She had floated gracefully through a couple of quadrilles with Nugent, who was dancer enough to go through them without positive awkwardness, but had declined others, being in truth much more interested in conversing with him than in anything beside.

Miss Orme, whose tastes and deportment were of the back-board school, was very pronounced indeed in her condemnation of Jean.

‘My dear child,’ had been her aside to Maude, ‘you will never succeed in imparting a refined tone to that young lady’s manners—never. I did not take to her at first, and I am very rarely at fault in my judgment. I am afraid she will prove quite an infliction at Fernside.’

‘Oh, pray do not speak in that way, dear Miss Orme! I have just been taking Nugent to task for that very thing. He will not allow enough for Jean. She is almost a child—but just out of school, you know.’

‘It is very kind, and like yourself to defend her, my dear; but I really must take Nugent’s side in this matter. Such a contrast!’ she murmured to her nephew when Maude went presently to speak to her mother.

‘Yes,’ he absently replied, following Maude with his eyes.

‘When am I to congratulate you, Nugent? How happy I shall be to welcome her to the Grange! Dear Maude! our tastes are so congenial!’

He patted the little lady’s hand, resting on the arm of the chair, amused at the idea of Maude being anything beyond kind and tender to his aunt. Congenial! They had not a taste in common!

Jean returned from her first ball with her shoes danced nearly off her feet, her dress limp and torn, a solitary rose hanging in her somewhat dishevelled hair, and a general aspect of having danced four-and-twenty dances with scarcely a rest between.

‘How could they ever!’ she ejaculated, gazing in dismay at the reflection of herself in the dressing-glass, when she reached her room, quite at a loss to account for the bad taste of her partners. But in ten minutes her limp finery was thrown off, her prayers said, and Jean was nestling down on her pillow fast asleep, her cheek upon her father’s letter, and a happy smile upon her lips.

CHAPTER VI.

ARDSEY GRANGE.

ARDSEY GRANGE—a large, low, irregularly-built, ivy-covered old house—is situated about three miles from Raystone. Approached from the main road by two long half-circular drives, from which road, above the thick plantation running parallel with it, there is only a glimpse of its steep roof and quaint chimneys. In front of the house there is lawn enough for two or three croquet-parties, notwithstanding the great cedars and old-fashioned basket-groups of flowers. But it is the south side or back of the house which is its pride and glory. From the drawing-room and library windows commences a broad stretch of green sward, bordered by a triple row of fine elms, widening grandly out towards the opposite extremity, and disclosing a beautiful open view of the country and distant wave of hills. The majestic old trees, in which innumerable rooks have for ages built undisturbed, are a fine setting to the

soft, swelling landscape beyond ; and the whole forms a picture scarcely to be matched for loveliness. The old Grange itself might have few admirers in these days, when romance is at a discount, and gorgeous 'palatial residences' are considered to be indispensable adjuncts of wealth, but its surroundings there could be no question about. The Ormes have owned the Grange for many succeeding generations, and are quite as attached to the old house as they are to its surroundings, never attempting anything in the way of improvement beyond keeping it in good repair. Its internal aspect is in keeping with the character of the house. A modern fine lady would be highly amused at the long drawing-room, with its spindle-legged furniture, out-of-date chintz, lack of gilding, and endless other evidences of fashion being either unknown or disregarded at the Grange.

The very suggestion of gas would have been an offence to Miss Orme ; and the furniture not being conducive to lounging habits was, in her estimation, a proof of its superiority over modern inventions. If her fashionable friends regarded her as quaint and behind the times Miss Orme had her consolations. In the matter of garden-parties it was generally acknowledged that none could compete with her. More matches were made at the Grange garden-fête than at all the

other gatherings in the county; and, naturally, none were so popular. That the beautiful grounds and woods might have something to do with the success of her parties did not enter into Miss Orme's calculations. She believed it was all owing to her superior tact and management.

In their everyday life the aunt and nephew saw very little of each other. During the years they had been separated, whilst he was at school or college, the little lady had occupied herself according to her own taste; and when he returned to the Grange 'dear Nugent' proved too kind and unselfish to wish her to change her habits. Elaborately prepared for the work, with thick shoes, garden-gloves and sun-bonnet, armed with a pair of scissors, and carrying a basket for her nippings, she trotted about the grounds, holding grave discussions with old Saunders, the head-gardener, over her flowers. 'As good a gardener, under proper supervision, as could be desired was Saunders,' said Miss Orme to her friends; and 'as good a mistress as ever stepped, when she was properly managed,' said Saunders to his friends.

Then there was the dearly-prized old china to be tenderly dusted (no housemaid's hands were allowed to touch it), visits to pay and receive, consultations with the housekeeper, the daily drive, and a certain amount of knitting to be got through

during the day. Altogether Miss Orme felt that her life was a very important one. When her nephew returned to reside at the Grange she had considered it her duty to spare him some portion of her time, arranging in her own mind to devote at least a couple of hours a day to cheer him with her society. She commenced by taking her knitting into the library, where he spent most of his time. But, unfortunately, he always happened to be smoking furiously when she entered the room, and she found herself enveloped in a cloud of tobacco-smoke, the smell of which made her head ache dreadfully. She bravely tried to endure, but was at length compelled to give him a hint that he really must excuse her paying him any more visits there unless he gave up smoking. Dear Nugent must be aware how very anxious she was to do her duty, and how painful it was to her to complain, but she was quite unable to endure the smell of tobacco.

Then it came out that the habit was necessary for his health. He had a tendency to suffer from irritation of the nerve-tissues, which nothing but tobacco would allay, and therefore he dared not discontinue his pipe. After which little confidence Miss Orme not only ceased to make objection, but became exceedingly anxious in her enquiries each evening whether he had taken his pipe, been very

careful as to the exact quantity to be used, and so forth. But, as she could not succeed in overcoming her repugnance to the tobacco, dear Nugent was good enough to excuse her visiting him in the library.

Although the Grange library cannot be said to be altogether a model one, according to modern ideas, it is large and cheerful, its oriel windows commanding the south view. Moreover, it has the generally comfortable appearance of being constantly used; and, to judge by the new books, reviews, pamphlets, &c. lying on the table, Nugent Orme is quite as much interested in the literature of the present as the past. It is, perhaps, just as well for her peace that Miss Orme is unable to visit the library, and is consequently unaware of the kind of reading her nephew indulges in. ‘Tell me what books are lying about his private room, and I will tell you the man,’ would utterly fail in application to Nugent Orme, so opposite are the opinions represented. Every important question of the day—religious, political, and social—is represented upon his library-table, with all the best opinions for and against it; and the marginal notes indicate that the reader is in the habit of carefully sifting and weighing evidence.

Great mistakes might be made by a superficial observer as to Nugent Orme’s own tastes and

opinions, and it must be acknowledged that he takes no trouble to enlighten people; it may be, even a little enjoying the idea of mystifying them. But whatever his private defection from orthodoxy may be, he is ready to respect the belief of others. The old rector of Raystone always meets with respect and consideration from the son of his old friend.

‘Dear, dear! I am sorry to find this here, boy!’ he ejaculates, taking up a fierce raid against Church and State.

‘And this,’ quietly returns Nugent Orme, putting before him as fierce a reply.

‘I see. Well, well, it seems the practice now to get at things by roundabout ways.’

‘We have not all the capability for going the direct road, like yourself, Dr. Brayleigh. You must try to be indulgent to me if I get what I want in the best way I can.’

‘Only be sure you want the right thing, boy.’ And the old rector would depart in the most friendly way, comforting himself with the hope that the boy was feeling his way to a belief, and that he was sound at the core, Colenso and all the rest of them notwithstanding. ‘But it was a sad mistake this ranging, speculative habit of reading and thinking. Nugent had, unfortunately, got into the wrong set at the University.’

‘What a fellow you are, Orme!’ said Louis Poynder, who had lounged in for an hour, and was turning over the last importation of books upon the table. ‘What man but you would go into all this bosh?’—adding, as he glanced over the authors’ names, ‘Swedenborg, Berkeley, and Reichenbach; what’s to be got out of these?’

‘That’s what I am trying to find out,’ laughed Nugent Orme.

‘I call you an awful example of the uselessness of becoming a reading man—always travelling roads that lead nowhere.’

‘I get the advantage of change of scene, any way. Besides, you haven’t acquired the right to throw stones yet, old man. You are an example that non-reading does not ensure settled convictions.’

‘Settled convictions! I leave all that sort of thing to the women and old Brayleigh.’ Which speech, could they have heard it, would have not a little surprised his lady friends and the old doctor; for Louis Poynder was a great deal more observant of the ceremonies of religion than Nugent Orme, and famed for his chivalrous attention to women. Indeed, Nugent Orme occasionally takes him to task for his excessive deference towards them.

‘I can’t conceive how it is they put up with all

that humbug, Poynder. How is it that they don't see such excessive deference in small things is more like a covert satire than a compliment?' he one day replied to a reminder from Louis that he had omitted to render some small service to his hostess at a dinner-party the night before. 'Couldn't she see that it would be no compliment to suppose her incapable of doing such a trifle as that without my assistance?'

'But, you see, it's the correct thing to offer, and they know they never look so bewitching as when they are helpless.'

'Not to me.'

'But when one is at Rome, you know. Fancy your asking Mrs. Wryville's opinion about "Comparative Mythology"—Mrs. Wryville, who was never suspected of an idea beyond millinery!'

'That's her look-out. It was certainly no ill compliment to suppose her competent to give an opinion. Your sister is well up in most of the questions afloat. Your'—there was a slight emphasis upon the word—'estimate of women seems none of the highest, and I can't conceive how it is that they don't find you out.'

When the two were alone together each entirely changed his tone, the one seeming to have dropped his cynicism and the other taken it up. Louis laughed, stretching out his feet on the hearth-

rug as he lay back in the comfortable lounging-chair, jingling the loose silver in his pockets. 'It's because I understand them better. I don't take them *au grand sérieux*, as you do, old man, and give them what they want. Why, I never heard you pay a woman a compliment—not even to little Jessie.'

'When I begin, it won't be to one of her stamp.'

'Ah, you are so awfully straight-laced; so ——' Suddenly recollecting his sister, he added, good-humouredly, 'All the better for the wife, by-and-bye, eh!'

'If she has the taste to approve of a straight-laced husband.'

'Well, fortunately for me, Jean will not be very *exigeante* in that way, I fancy.'

'Your cousin? Jean—that child! You are not thinking of her, Poynder?'

'Yes, I am rather. But'—he went on more frankly than he had ever yet spoken to the other—'pray don't give me credit for more softness than I possess, old fellow. It's not a question of choice.'

'I do not understand.'

'Circumstances have turned out awfully against me, Orme; and there is no hope of my righting myself now unless I marry her.'

‘Then you do not care for her?’ asked Nugent, running a paper-knife slowly through the leaves of a pamphlet he held in his hand, his eyes gravely downcast.

‘I must marry her, Orme.’ Suddenly the latter’s blue eyes seemed turned to steel flashing a warning into the other’s face. ‘No, no,’ he went on, hurriedly, ‘it’s—it’s a question of money. What an ass I am!’ he thought, as it suddenly occurred to him that he had drifted into saying just what he ought not to have said—what he had been especially warned by his mother and sister not to say to Nugent Orme. But, having gone so far, he blundered on, hot and confused in the endeavour to explain matters a little. ‘The truth is we have been very scurvily treated, Orme. As long as I can remember my uncle has led us to expect that he would make me his heir; and knowing my mother’s means were small, he has made her a very good allowance since my father’s death. But a few months ago he stops the supplies, and coolly informs us that he has been married some years, and has a daughter at school in England, whom he intends to make his heir. You will allow that it’s awfully unjust and hard upon us?’

Nugent Orme listened a little abstractedly. He had imagined that the Poynders and himself

were like one family. How was it that he had received no hint of all this before? Who had first given him the impression that Mrs. Poynder had offered her niece a home purely out of kindness? But he put the uncomfortable doubt aside, and replied, 'Yes, I think it is; but—two wrongs don't make a right, old man; and I don't see why your cousin should have to pay for her father's injustice by being married to a man who doesn't care about her. A moment, Poynder. There ought not to be the slightest hesitation or difficulty between you and me in money matters. Of course you'll take whatever you want for a start in life out of my superabundance? You know I don't get through a quarter of my income. In truth, I am ashamed of having so much idle money in hand, and shall be glad if you will take whatever you require. Hadn't you a fancy for——'

'I'm past the age for serving apprenticeships,' moodily replied Louis, 'and—I can't take your money.'

Nugent Orme was silent, gravely cutting a few more pages of his pamphlet, the lines about his mouth tightening a little. Half-perceiving his thought, the other went on—

'She's my cousin, after all; and though I do not pretend to be deeply in love with her, no one could dislike Jean.'

‘Would you marry her if the case were reversed, and the money came to you after all?’

‘If you put me in a corner like that, no.’ Then, in the recklessness of his discontent, he went on: ‘If the money were mine I would marry little Jessie to-morrow.’

‘Jessie!’

‘Why not?’ a little sullenly.

Nugent Orme stared at him for a few moments, quite speechless. Then his face cleared again, and he said, with a smile, ‘I advise you to take a blue-pill, Poynder.’

‘Don’t talk like a fool. I am in earnest if you are not.’

In earnest! Nugent Orme’s eyes fell and a grey shade crept over his face, his hand wandering aimlessly amongst the papers on the table by his side. As men of his calibre are apt to do, he had taken a great deal for granted in his friend, and in fact Louis Poynder had always hitherto been a good-humoured and at times brilliant companion, his gayer and more buoyant nature having its attractions for such as Nugent Orme. Untroubled with doubts, he gaily accepted the world as he found it, passing his time in a good-humoured flirtation with religious, political, and social questions, as many consider it best philosophy to do. Moreover, he had not until the last few

months been inclined to carp at other people's ways, however much they might differ from his own. Nugent Orme's serious way of taking up things had been a standing jest with him, and indeed his frequent exclamation, 'What's the good of going into things to such an extent, old fellow? one only gets more sceptical,' had seemed to have some philosophy in it to one arduously making his way through a slough of doubt. It would have been absolutely impossible for Nugent Orme to pass through life as the other had been doing, and yet he had frequently envied him his capacity for taking things as he found them. But the capacity seemed to have treacherously failed Louis Poynder in the hour of need. His philosophy had speedily collapsed under the pressure of circumstances—circumstances which would have brought the other's latent power to the surface, and given his mind just the impetus it needed. Nugent Orme was himself half-conscious that he would have welcomed a challenge to wrestle a fall with Fortune; and, judging from the other's light-hearted acceptance of things as they were, he had given him credit for greater power of recovery after a blow. Suddenly had come this revelation. The friend whom he had looked upon as a brother—Maude's brother—and whose easy nature he had considered so much more

enviable than his own carping one, had succumbed under the first blow. That Louis Poynder could contemplate marrying his cousin for her money, and, if he had had money, would have chosen a girl whom he himself had always regarded as a painted doll, without an idea in her betrimmed and befrizzled head—a girl ready to bandy jokes with any man who chose to address her—came like a shock upon him.

‘It’s all very well for you, Orme,’ presently went on Louis Poynder; ‘I dare say you are virtuously shocked, and all that sort of thing. You know you are always orthodox where other people are lax, and lax where other people are orthodox; but just try to suppose yourself in my position—I am sure you would do the same thing. Come, don’t you think you would—honestly, now?’

Nugent Orme looked hesitatingly into the other’s face. ‘It’s not for me to say, Poynder. I’m not a shining light, as you know, and I don’t want to assume that I should do the right thing under pressure; but I can certainly conceive something better than marrying a girl one does not care about for the sake of her money. A moment, old man—I must go on now and have done with it. Marrying the other seems to me even worse. How could you introduce a person like that to

your mother and sister? How could you expect them to receive her?’

‘I am not likely to have the chance of putting them to the test,’ moodily returned Louis Poynder.

‘So far good; and in the event of your cousin being fancy-free you will find a couple of thousand placed to your account at the bank; it will be managed all right by my London man of business, and paid in as the debt it is. It will never be touched if you do not claim it; and you must know I don’t want you to confine yourself to that sum, if you will only be friendly enough to take more.’

‘Would you take it from me, if our position were reversed?’

‘Yes, I would, and set to work with it at once,’ heartily.

The ‘set to work’ grated harshly upon the other’s ears, and he replied a little constrainedly, ‘I don’t see why I should accept money from you, if I am too immaculate to accept it from my wife.’

‘But in the event of your cousin not——’

‘If you mean she might not care for me, I am not at all disturbed on that score. My only fear is that she might prove a trifle too affectionate.’ Then, rising from his seat, he added, a little

awkwardly, 'Are you coming into the town, Orme?'

'No, not this morning,' rather stiffly. Yet he followed the other out, and walked with him as far as the road, eyeing him wistfully now and again, as each tried to get into the old groove of talk again, and tried in vain. For other reasons both were very much disturbed at what had taken place. Louis Poynder was angry with himself for having spoken so openly, and the latter felt as though he were bidding good-bye for ever to the friend, or rather the illusion, of his boyhood. He stood hesitating, an almost womanish pleading in his eyes, when at length Louis Poynder passed into the road and swung the gate between them, as if he still hoped to hear the other recant and declare all he had said was 'mere moonshine, to set your back up, old fellow'—a way of getting out of a difficulty which had been adopted upon other occasions. Louis looked straight along the road, only desirous to get away as quickly and pleasantly as possible.

'You won't come, then?'

'No, I want to look over that pamphlet.'

'Well, you'll look us up presently, I suppose?' called out Louis, as he went briskly along the road.

Nugent turned back, walked slowly towards

the house again, and in a few minutes all trace of weakness was gone. A hard, cynical smile was on his lips, and he looked altogether in what his aunt termed 'one of her dear Nugent's unsatisfactory moods.' It so happened, too, that he came upon the little lady walking briskly down the drive on her way out.

'Something important, Aunt Jemmy?' Now, Miss Orme had a great objection to this curtailment of her name which was Jemima; and though she was too much absorbed to protest against it at the moment, it jarred upon her very unpleasantly.

'Very important indeed, Nugent,' she replied, with a solemn shake of her head. 'I am going to the Rectory.'

'So far! Why not have had the carriage?'

'I could not wait. It is to follow and take me up on the road.'

'In that case your walking will not expedite matters, and you might just as well start in the carriage.'

'It was necessary to go at once,' she rather irrelevantly replied, in her anxiety to make him understand how very important her mission was, and perhaps not altogether averse to being questioned about it, notwithstanding her mysterious air.

'Ah!' with a half-suppressed yawn.

How trying Nugent was when he put on that air of not caring for things! It really was a defect to be so unsympathetic.

‘I hope you will excuse my not entering into particulars until I have seen the Rector, Nugent?’

‘Oh, yes, certainly,’ still rather absently, as he walked towards the gate with her.

‘You see, my dear boy, there are questions which by right of his office a clergyman is more fit than anyone else to discuss.’

‘Yes, I suppose so, Aunt Jemmy.’

‘And I need not tell you that Dr. Brayleigh may be safely trusted in the most important matters.’ Then she added, earnestly, ‘But I assure you I do not intend to keep anything from your knowledge, Nugent.’

‘You are quite sure, aunt?’ he replied, with a very serious face.

‘My dear boy,’ ejaculated the little lady, quite distressed, ‘I would not for the world have you believe that I wish to keep you in ignorance of anything I do. I quite intended to explain at luncheon.’

‘Then I will try to wait patiently,’ he replied, opening the gate for her.

‘Only two hours, you know, Nugent dear.’

‘All right, Aunt Jemmy.’

‘You see it was such a serious thing to occur

in a house. I saw at once that no time must be lost, if the girl is to be saved, although the responsibility is enormous.'

'Ah!' with a side-look into the earnest little face.

'E-normous!' she repeated, in high feather. 'When Ford told me just now that he had been seen on several occasions talking to the girl——'

'He—Dr. Brayleigh?'

'No, no, John Wild, the under-gardener. And when Ford told me that he was a Roman Catholic, and frequently having interviews with Mary, I saw the danger at once.'

'Mary? Are you speaking about the under-housemaid?'

'Yes; and if you happen to meet John Wild it would be well to give him a hint that he cannot be permitted to hold any further communication with her, Nugent—at least for the present—until she has had two or three interviews with the Rector, and been advised how to reply to him.'

'You are too late, Aunt Jemmy. Only this morning Wild himself was talking about her to me, and I gave my hearty concurrence to his seeing a great deal more instead of less of her.'

Miss Orme stopped, looking blankly up into her nephew's face.

'You gave him permission to—to proselytize her?'

‘So far as marrying her goes, Aunt Jemmy. He tells me that they can live very comfortably upon his wages, at the North Lodge, and that they have both saved enough to start fairly with.’

‘Marry her!’ ejaculated Miss Orme, in the greatest astonishment. It had not once entered into the little lady’s head that the interviews between John and Mary had been employed in love-making instead of doctrinal discussions. Never had she felt more crestfallen. But she presently remembered the fact of the man being a Roman Catholic. ‘You will never stand quietly by and see the poor girl drawn into such a marriage, Nugent? Think of the consequences to her. I am sure you did not know that he was not a Protestant when you gave your permission. You would never forgive yourself if she were lost through your negligence.’

‘But how if Wild gets lost?’

‘He is quite different. There would be no fear of his being lost if he thought right, you know.’

‘Ah! there is something in that, only it brings us back to Mary, you see. We must let them take their chance, I think, Aunt Jemmy.’ Looking down at the little lady’s anxious, perplexed face, he went on kindly: ‘But I really think you can do very well without Dr. Brayleigh’s help in the

matter. It requires judicious management, to be sure. People don't like having their religious opinions interfered with, and if it's done at all it requires very delicate manipulation. But if you went warily to work—say by making Mary a present of the little tract, "Truth in a Nutshell," which you gave me—it might, I think, be more effectual than discussion. Indeed, I think it would be assuming a more dignified attitude to say nothing, simply leaving the tract to make its own way, as you did in my case, you know.'

'My *dear* boy!' ejaculated the little lady, with a delighted look, 'if I had only known! There are many others, "The Believer's Help," and the——'

'You are very kind, but that would be retrograding, you know. The help should have come first. After getting the truth into a so delightfully condensed form as to lie in a nutshell, one is independent of all the rest.'

'Really, Nugent, I never know whether you are in earnest or not. If you are not now, I must remind you that jesting upon sacred subjects is, to say the least, in very bad taste.'

'I beg your pardon, Aunt Jemmy, so it is. There's something wrong about me this morning, I think.'

'It is an east wind, my dear boy, and I dare

say you are feeling the ill effects upon your nerve-tissues,' she replied, looking tenderly up at the great frame. Have you had your tobacco this morning, dear—the right quantity?'

'A couple of pipes or so, aunt.'

'Do you think you get the right kind at Raystone, dear? Wouldn't it be better to have it forwarded direct from town?' she anxiously enquired.

'Oh, yes, it's all right,' he replied, a little consciously, ashamed of what he mentally termed his humbug; though he told himself she would have it. Presently he went on: 'You are *quite* sure Wild is a Catholic, aunt?'

Miss Orme considered a few moments. *Was* she quite sure? Now she came to think of it, Ford had hinted something about Mary having intended to live single before she said, 'But John Wild is endeavouring to give her a different belief now, ma'am.'

'No, I cannot say that Ford told me in so many words, Nugent; but she said that John Wild was trying to give Mary a different belief. And—oh, yes, Ford said he had given her a cross. Still,' the little lady went on hurriedly, 'I think with you, Nugent. I am quite equal to managing the affair without troubling Dr. Brayleigh. There can be no harm in giving Mary the

tract to begin with ; and if she appears properly impressed I shall let the matter rest until I hear more.'

'A very judicious course, Aunt Jemmy.'

Whereat the little lady turned back towards the house in a very complacent frame of mind. 'Dear Nugent ! it was so kind and good of him to say that ! Some people were unwilling to allow that anything was judicious unless it were suggested by themselves !'

CHAPTER VII.

AT THE FÊTE.

MANY of the Raystone elect still held to their first verdict respecting Jean, whilst Mrs. Poynder's goodness and generosity in giving her a home, and accepting all the consequent responsibility and trouble, was lauded to the skies. Happy unconscious Jean ! Her existence went on as blithely as though the Raystone verdict had been in her favour. She was still overwhelmed with her good fortune, and, in truth, there was little to complain of had she been inclined to be *exigeante*. Although she had not made much way with the elder portion of the community, she very quickly found favour in the eyes of the younger, and was much too happy to be critical as to the cause, readily enough ascribing it all to their goodness. She was in a continual state of wonder at people's goodness ; and as to the world, why, it was an enchanted garden of delights, old Dr. Brayleigh's warnings about the danger of loving it not-

withstanding. It was such a dear, beautiful old world—that lovely sweep of green turf with the shadows chasing each other over it, and the trees and—and everything. Surely the Giver of it all could not be angry with her for loving it, she thought, ignorant of the dark shadow of evil which is typified by the word in the pulpit. In truth, her religion was as yet but the poetic sentiment of the young and untried, to whom evil is only a name. Such of her young acquaintances as did not seek her for her own sake were glad to catch at an excuse for dropping in at Fernside on their way to the heath, the favourite walk out of Raystone. Though they liked going to the Cottage, where they frequently met Louis Poynder and other of the Raystone young men, they were a little afraid of beautiful, clever, but occasionally rather too sarcastic Maude. But Jean was soon voted ‘a dear’ amongst the young girls of Mrs. Poynder’s set. Her quaint surprise at their wonderful toilets, and their astonishment at her old-fashioned simplicity, caused endless fun between them.

‘Not a bit up to things, you know, but a real dear!’ said Annie Lawrence, who in her innocence and ignorance prided herself upon being ‘up to things,’ because it was the fashion so to seem. A frank, kindhearted, thoroughly *good* girl, to whom no man for a moment imputed the knowledge

which her manners and style of dress seemed to imply. Indeed, her brother and his friends were rather too apt to encourage her for their own private delectation, as being so amusing a contrast to the reality. Annie Lawrence and Ellen Brayleigh, the old Rector's granddaughter, left in his charge by her parents in India, very soon called themselves Jean's especial friends, upon sufficiently intimate terms to invite her to join in their walking expeditions. Maude and her mother quite approved; the former was not often in the mood to bring herself down to the level of a romantic schoolgirl, and Mrs. Poynder found her niece a too good walker, and a too exuberant companion, for one of her years. Had they imagined how frequently, as time went on, Edward Lawrence and Arthur Brayleigh joined their sisters, they would not have been quite so easy upon the point. It was unconscious Jean herself who gave them the first hint of danger.

'Edward Lawrence again did you say, my dear?' asked Mrs. Poynder one day at dinner, when Jean had been detailing the afternoon's adventures.

'Yes, aunty; we nearly always meet him now—Mr. Brayleigh and him—and it is so nice. Fancy our walking all the way to Ashleigh and back—much farther than going straight to Ardsey

Grange, you know. The funniest little village, isn't it, aunty, with its rough stone cottages and two shops? We asked for some water at one of the cottages, and Edward Lawrence broke the cup afterwards, so that no one else should use it. The poor woman looked so shocked, and I was so vexed; but he promised to buy her a new tea-service, and I am to choose it in the town.'

Mrs. Poynder finished her dinner with a very grave face, beginning now to suspect why Edward Lawrence displayed so sudden an accession of friendship for the inmates of Fernside. When Jean and Maude quitted the room, she availed herself of the opportunity to warn her son that he had no time to lose if he wished to prevent the other from making further advances.

He laughed. 'All right, mother; I'm not afraid of being cut out by Lawrence. I shall walk over the ground when it suits me. She'll be none the worse for having a little flirtation—won't be quite so namby-pamby when I take her in hand, perhaps.'

'But it may not stop at flirtation, you know,' said the anxious mother. 'Indeed, I do not think she is the kind of girl to flirt at all.'

'I'm not afraid.'

Wherewith his mother tried to feel content. Her son fully believed that when he chose to walk

over the ground, as he termed it, there would not be the slightest obstacle to prevent his doing so. Nevertheless his mother's hint was not entirely lost upon him, and he began to make a few lazy advances. Then he found that the task was not quite so easy a one as he had expected it to be. It was very difficult, indeed, to be loverlike to Jean. Did he become a little *empressé*, straight-way she was openly affectionate, and the difficulty was that the vainest man in existence could not for a moment have been mistaken as to what kind of affection it was. Louis Poynder's self-love was not a little wounded at her evident freedom from any symptom of caring for him, in the way he had taken it as a matter of course she would care. He soon began to feel quite irritated at the frank affection which was more than cousinly (in her ignorance Jean exaggerated their relationship into the closer one of brother and sister) and was yet so far from being loverlike.

‘What are you reading now, Jean? You ought not to strain your eyes like that.’

She had taken her book to the window, to use up the last bit of fading light.

‘One minute, please, Louis. They are just going into the cave.’

‘You are always poring over some book.’

She was indeed rarely to be seen without a

book in her hand, reading with the greatest avidity anything and everything that came in her way. Maude selected the books that came from the London library, and they were of the solidest ; but Jean had ransacked the house, and come upon a store of old poems and romances, and she was already on familiar terms with Shakespeare, Spenser, the Chevalier Bayard, Goldsmith, Jane Austen, &c.

She shut the book with a low sigh, and laid her cheek caressingly upon it, her eyes wandering dreamily over the heath.

‘You seem to prefer anything to listening to me,’ he presently added, rather sullenly.

She turned impulsively towards him. ‘Oh, no, indeed, Louis dear ! Why I care more for you than anyone almost. Cannot you see that I do ?’

‘Cannot *you* see, Jean ?’ he ejaculated, impatiently kicking a footstool along the carpet.

She looked down at the stool, and then up into his face again, so manifestly puzzled that, in spite of himself, he burst into a laugh and gave up the attempt for that day. ‘She seems to have no more sense than a baby about some things,’ he afterwards grumbled to his mother. ‘She will never be like other girls, and mooning over books as she does won’t improve her.’

‘I hope there is no attachment springing up between Edward Lawrence and her,’ once more said Mrs. Poynder.

‘Don’t talk rubbish, mother. She hasn’t an idea what love is, and she isn’t the sort of girl ever to be capable of much in that way. As to Lawrence, if he is fool enough to enter the race against me, he will soon find himself nowhere.’

Mrs. Poynder tried to feel reassured, telling herself that of course Edward Lawrence could have no chance against her boy. ‘Jean must be blind indeed not to perceive dear Louis’s superiority. Still, she wished Louis would bring matters to a crisis. The sooner the engagement was made known the better now. The Ormes’ garden party would afford a very good opportunity for making it known, if dear Louis would only settle it at once. Many besides Mrs. Poynder were counting upon the opportunities at the Ormes’ garden party. Edward Lawrence had made up his mind to try his fortune with Jean, with whom, to the best of his capacity, he was deeply in love, and Maude Poynder determined that Nugent Orme should be brought to the point some way, to say nothing of the many others eagerly anticipating the event of the year to bring about a crisis in their lives.

Jean had only accompanied her cousin Maude

to the Grange upon two or three occasions, and then she had found herself rather *de trop*, Miss Orme making no effort to appear more cordial than she felt towards her. She had sat stiff and prim in the little lady's morning room during the visit, feeling almost as though she were back at Ivy Lodge again. Indeed, Miss Orme always assumed a schoolmistress tone in speaking to Jean the few sentences addressed to her, being carefully adapted to a child's intelligence, and inculcating a very pronounced moral. The girl offended her sense of propriety, and propriety was part of Miss Orme's religion. She had not taken the trouble to show the glories of the Grange to Jean. The latter had only seen its north aspect, and wondered to hear people talk so much of its beauties. There was the fine lawn, to be sure ; but Jean thought that the view of the heath from Fernside was quite as good and less bounded.

No one seemed able to talk of anything but the coming fête, and the earnest way in which the millinery question was discussed showed Jean how very important the occasion was considered to be. Annie Lawrence confided to her that she had ordered the most startling of costumes and 'the most daring little hat you can conceive, my dear.' She shrugged her pretty shoulders when in answer to her enquiries, Jean confessed that Aunt Maria

always chose what she was to wear, and she had not asked what her dress was to be. But she was too kindhearted to make any other comment. 'I suppose the dear child [Annie Lawrence had arrived at the mature age of eighteen] is too dependent upon them to have any will of her own,' she thought. 'But her turn will come soon; Edward won't grudge her anything, and I can put her up to things a little when she gets less shy with me.' For at times there was still a difference—reserve, or what Annie Lawrence termed shyness—between them. Ellen Brayleigh gave it the name of romance; but the other warmly defended her favourite from such an imputation. 'Oh, no, Ellen; that's too bad! Jean isn't a bit silly. That dreamy way she has sometimes is only manner, because she had no companions of her own age at school. She's the jolliest darling, and has got lots of fun in her when you draw her out.'

But Ellen Brayleigh had once or twice seen something in Jean to which she could give no name, if romance was not the right word for it.

Jean did not know, nor perhaps did Mrs. Poynder herself, that her dresses were always chosen to contrast with, and, so to speak, serve as a background to, her cousin Maude's. But it generally happened that the colours contrasting with

Maude's became her; or if they were a little too sombre in tone, a latent artistic taste of her own caused her to add a bow or flower, which imparted the required tint. When she entered the drawing-room attired for the fête, her dress was entirely white, even to the feather in her hat, and though a pretty enough contrast to Maude's mauves, it was a little trying to the wearer.

'You require a little colour about you, Jean,' said Louis critically. He was quite willing she should be admired, although not appropriated, by other men.

'Do I? Oh, yes; why of course I do!' she ejaculated, looking in the glass. 'But I can easily manage it by putting a rose-coloured bow or two on my dress; and if I may have some roses—may I, aunty?'

'Certainly, dear, as many as you please, and the rose-coloured bows really would be an improvement.'

'Would not you prefer a coloured feather in your hat, Jean? I have a green one I could lend you,' asked Maude.

'Oh, no, thank you. The ribbons and roses will do,' replied unconscious Jean. 'Light and dark ones mixed, you know, Louis—lots of them, and nothing else.'

He made havoc amongst the roses, and in five

minutes Jean was transformed. Knots of rose-coloured ribbons about her dress, and roses in her hand and at her breast, gave just the finishing touch to her toilette, which would have satisfied an artist, though it somewhat destroyed the effect of her cousin's mauves. Little did Jean suspect the surprise that awaited her. When she entered the Grange drawing-room, and her eyes fell upon the lovely view from its windows, she stood as if spell-bound, quite deaf to the few words of welcome uttered by Miss Orme, and thereby confirming the little lady's previous impressions respecting her.

'May I go out?' she presently whispered to her cousin. 'Oh, Maude, may I, please?' with brilliant eyes and deepening colour.

'Yes, of course you may, child,' absently replied Maude, as Nugent Orme entered the room at the moment, and advanced towards her. 'Louis or mamma will accompany you if you ask one of them.'

Taking instant advantage of the permission, and without giving a thought to the propriety of being accompanied, Jean hastily stole out of the nearest window, and stood for a few moments as if spellbound.

The marquees for refreshment were placed to the left of the house, and there was nothing to vulgarise or interfere with the prospect, the ani-

mated faces and pretty dresses of the lady guests and uniforms of the bandsmen adding only life and colour to the scene. The broad green sward, bathed in sunshine, the soft swelling uplands in the distance, the grateful shade of the fine old trees on either side, the right deepening into cool shadowy woods, and the left gently undulating towards a lake, glittering like diamonds here and there through the foliage, imparted an idea of colour, space, and harmony not often to be seen at fêtes.

Jean glanced at the company. Some were standing about in groups, renewing and making acquaintance, amidst soft laughter and pretty patter of words, whilst others were already straying with *the* one under the trees. ‘No one will miss me,’ she thought delightedly. And, descending the broad steps of the terrace, she turned to the right and went towards the woods.

‘Where is Jean?’ two or three hours later enquired Mrs. Poynder, first of one and then of the other.

No one could tell her. She was all the more anxious to ascertain in consequence of a rumour that had reached her. She had been asked if it was true that an engagement was on the tapis between her niece and Edward Lawrence. The latter’s sister made so very sure that when her brother’s mind was quite made up Jean would be

found willing, that she had given one or two of her friends a hint what to expect. Mrs. Poynder had been more than once congratulated upon her niece's engagement. Edward Lawrence was the son of a rich man, and considered a prize in the matrimonial lottery. The anxious mother tried to impress the necessity for immediate action upon her son. It was so very thoughtless of Louis to lose sight of Jean that day. But he was enjoying his freedom, and had no idea of losing his prestige by assuming the position of an engaged man before it was absolutely necessary to so do. He quieted his mother by promising to look after Jean, and in ten minutes had forgotten her in a flirtation with Annie Lawrence.

There was one looking for Jean in earnest, and he at length found her. Her hat thrown off, her hair thrust back from her brow, and her hands clasped behind her head, she was half-sitting, half-lying in one of nature's seats, dainty enough for Titania herself, in a little mossy dell half hidden in the leafy solitude of the woods.

‘Miss Raymond!’ delightedly.

‘Mr. Lawrence!’ in how different a tone, as she gathered up her hat and gloves.

‘Do not rise! Pray let me join you!’ he said eagerly.

‘Oh, no. You have spoiled it all now,’ a little

impatiently—‘just as I could almost hear their tinkling feet.’

He looked round.

‘The fairies, you know. How can you help believing in them a tiny little here?’

‘I only know it is fairy-land to me,’ he stammered out, reddening and paling with hope and fear, as he hurried on, too much in earnest to pick and choose his words; ‘but any place would seem that to me where you are.’

She glanced at him with troubled eyes, and turned slowly away.

‘Do not go: pray let me speak to you! Pray forgive my abruptness, but—oh, Jean, do you not know—have you not seen that I love you?’ fastening his eyes upon her downcast face.

‘I know—I have thought latterly that you were not quite the same as other people are to me; but I am very sorry if that is the reason,’ she murmured.

‘Oh, do not say so! do not say that!’ he pleaded, growing very white.

‘But I must say it if it is true. I am sorry—very, very sorry.’ Looking at him with puzzled eyes (she was quite as much puzzled as sorry), she added, ‘However came you to?’

‘How could I help it, knowing you? Oh, Jean, give me some hope!’

‘I—forgive me if I do not say it in the right way, please do. I am sure I don’t want to seem unkind, but I don’t care about being loved in that way. I like reading about it in books, but it does not seem nice in reality, and—I am afraid I have a hard heart. Oh, dear! pray do not look like that! Whatever can I say to comfort you? I’m not half so nice as other girls, when you come to know me. Louis is always complaining about my being so different, and I never had a prize at school, and no girl could have more natural defects. Miss Bowles always said so.’

‘Then she was an idiot, whoever she was. But be your defects what they may, I love you as I shall never love another as long as I live,’ he simply replied, trying to bear the blow in manly fashion, but quivering painfully under it. Then came a momentary gleam of hope. There did not appear to be anyone else in her thoughts; perhaps, in time, there might be a chance for him. ‘Will you let me try to win your love, Miss Raymond? Oh, Jean, let me try! I know I am not worthy of you; no man could ever be that; but I will wait so patiently, and strive so hard!’

He was answered by her sorrowful gesture and the tears stealing down her cheeks, and he went on in a low voice, ‘Do not be unhappy; do not let me feel I have marred your enjoyment. May

I take you towards the band, Miss Raymond? I can show you the shortest way through the plantations.' For, if his love was not of the very highest order, he was sincere and unselfish enough to wish to see her happy.

'I don't care about it now,' she said simply. 'How could I, when I know I have given you pain? I would rather stay here a little, and I think—yes, there are my cousin and Mr. Orme, so you need not mind.'

'Good-bye, Jean. God bless you, Miss Raymond!' he whispered, darting away as the others advanced.

'Jean!' ejaculated Maude, as she recognised the bowed figure and noted the young girl's dejected air. 'And who was that hurrying away?' she wondered. She was angry as well as surprised. Just as they came within sight of Jean, Nugent Orme had once more approached the subject which was of such vital importance to her. The words her soul hungered for seemed upon his lips when this girl once more prevented their being spoken.

'Was that Louis who just left you?' she went on to ask the confused, blushing girl.

'No.'

'Would it not be wiser to keep with those you know, my dear Jean?'

‘Oh, yes, ever so much wiser,’ ruefully returned Jean; ‘but it is too late now.’

‘Too late to be wiser, Miss Raymond?’

She turned away, and, with an angry jerk, threw one of her roses against the trunk of a tree, its leaves lightly drifting in all directions.

‘Now, if I stood where that tree is, and your flower were a stone,’ he said, with an amused smile, but looking a little curiously at her flushed face.

‘Has anyone offended you, Jean?’ softly asked Maude.

‘Myself,’ a little curtly.

‘Offended with yourself?’ laughed Maude.

‘Then I fear I cannot be of any assistance.’

‘No.’

Nugent Orme gazed speculatively at the girlish face, which expressed so much more than Jean was conscious that it did.

‘Are you coming with us, Jean?’

‘Yes, if you please—if you don’t mind,’ said blundering Jean, becoming aware of something less genial than usual in the other’s tone.

‘Mind? No, of course not; why should I?’ returned poor Maude, obliged to keep a smile on her face though ready to cry with vexation. ‘Perhaps you would like to go towards the open where the band is?’

‘Where you please, Maude; I don’t care,’ dolefully from Jean.

‘An awful retribution is said to have once come upon a young gentleman who “did not care,” Miss Raymond. He was torn to pieces by wild bears on the coast of Barbary.’

‘I don’t see why you should always talk to me as though I were a child, Mr. Orme. I call it very rude as well as unkind.’

‘Jean!’

‘Well, Maude, would not you think so if Mr. Orme were the same to you?’

‘Let me apologise without waiting for the verdict,’ he said gravely. ‘I am really sorry to appear rude or unkind to you, Miss Raymond. I had not the least intention of being either.’

‘I dare say it is a great deal my fault, Mr. Orme; but I am not quite so stupid as you think me. I am sure I could understand better if you tried to make me.’

He bowed silently, and presently, to her great relief, seemed to become too much absorbed in conversation with Maude to remember her existence. ‘Ah, it’s no wonder he finds me stupid in comparison with Maude, though it is not kind to let me see it so plainly,’ thought Jean, as she listened to her cousin’s well-chosen sentences, uttered in a low, sweet, even tone. But, as Maude

intended they should (it was no use keeping in the words if Jean was with them), they were soon in the midst of the company, Maude showing her fitness to be the future mistress of the Grange by many a kindly graceful speech when Nugent Orme tried to do his part as host. Jean sat down near the band, and presently Louis came to her side, prepared to make up a little for previous neglect.

‘There is some talk of dancing for an hour or so when the sun is down, Jean,’ he whispered; ‘and you must remember I don’t mean to let you waltz with anyone but me.’

‘I don’t want to dance, thank you, Louis.’

‘Don’t want?’ He glanced at her grave face, and fancying that she was piqued, and was at last beginning to be a little like other girls, and trying to coquette with him, ‘Not with *me*, Jean, after my keeping myself free for you? What have I done to deserve such punishment as that?’

‘Nothing—only—please don’t ask me, Louis.’

‘But you promised, you know, if there should be any dancing. Nonsense, Jean; of course you will; come along.’

‘No; I could not—not now. It would be like dancing over a grave.’

‘What is the matter—has anything happened?’ he asked, his keen black eyes trying to

fathom her soft brown ones. Although her eyelids drooped beneath his gaze, and she averted her blushing, conscious face, her lips were firmly closed. Frank and true as she was, he had known her long enough to be aware that she had a will stronger than his own when she chose to exercise it, and he saw that she now did not choose to explain the cause of her sudden disinclination for dancing.

‘Come and have something to eat. You look fagged and not half yourself to-day. The most romantic young ladies—you know you are given to romance—cannot live entirely upon air, and life will have quite another aspect for you after a little chicken and champagne.’

She rose to accompany him; anything was better than being catechised. On their way to the tent, they met Annie Lawrence, with two or three adorers in her wake.

‘Where have you hidden yourself all day, child?’ she ejaculated in gay spirits, having succeeded in shocking the ‘slow Unwins’ to her heart’s content. ‘Have you seen Edward lately, anyone—have you, Jean? Mr. Tarleton says he saw him going away; but that could not be. Wasn’t he with you just now, dear?’

Jean’s downcast eyes, fluttering colour, and nervous little whispered ‘Yes’ gave the sister

half a hint, and told Louis, who had previously been so puzzled to account for her grave reticence, all.

‘She has refused him!’ was his swift, triumphant thought; ‘and I’m all right now!’

‘She *cannot* have refused my Edward!’ thought the indignant little sister. ‘She cannot have been so stupid as that. Refuse Edward—a chit like her—when any other girl would thank her stars for such a chance! If she can’t love him, dear good fellow as he is, she is not what I believed her to be.’ And in her love for her brother Annie Lawrence was, for the time being, quite unjust to her friend. She turned away with a toss of the head, a look meant to be very cutting, and a severe little speech about ‘Edward being dearer to her than anyone else in the world.’

But Jean was not at all inclined to resent her anger. She was too really troubled at having given rise to it.

Louis had quite recovered his spirits. There was no necessity to hurry matters now. He could enjoy his freedom a little longer, and come to the fore again when it suited him so to do. So he made himself a very amusing companion, and, in spite of herself, soon made Jean feel that she had not entirely lost her capacity for enjoyment

although she was still firm in her decision not to dance. But he was quite agreeable to that now, leaving her to do as she chose, without any further protest.

She sat quiet and abstracted, longing for the day to be over. She was afraid now to separate from the rest of the company, and could not enjoy either the music or the scenery in her own fashion, without the accompaniment of the light laughter and babble of talk around her. So she sat with, though not of, them, gazing wistfully towards the shadowland beneath the trees. The loveliness of the scene had a more bewitching charm to her, now that the red gold of sunset was succeeded by soft silver moonlight.

How was it she was so different to other girls? How was it she could not love Edward Lawrence? He was so good, and kind, and nice-looking. She had liked him so much before he began to talk love to her, and then her heart had seemed to harden. 'No, I am not like other girls. I do not think I shall ever feel that sort of love—unless—but he is only in a book, and of course he would not like me if he were real!'

'My dear Jean, what has become of you all day? I really have not caught sight of you once!' said Mrs. Poynder, tapping her on the

shoulder. 'I hope Louis has seen after you in the way of refreshments and so forth?'

'Oh, yes, thank you, aunty; he wanted me to have lots of things. Louis is always so kind.'

'But how is it you have not joined the dancers, my dear? Did not Louis——'

'Yes; he wanted me to, but I did not care about it.'

The anxious mother glanced down at the pale, thoughtful face. Was it the time for congratulation? She did not feel quite sure enough to venture; but went on gently, half-interrogatively—

'Louis feels a great deal more than kind to you, Jean dear.'

'And so do I to him, aunty. No one is so nice as Louis.'

'No one?' with a playful little tap on the young girl's cheek.

'I meant no gentleman—except papa, you know. Dear father, was he like you, Aunt Maria, fair and tall?'

'No, dear, dark and short.'

'Dark!' with a disappointed look. 'I always pictured him tall and fair, with grey eyes—grand-looking.'

The mother jealously remembered that by a slight stretch of imagination that description

might apply to Edward Lawrence, and a little pettishly replied, 'You would be very unlike your father if he were that.'

'Yes, all but being tall.' Then, after a moment or two, she went on, 'Did you know mamma, Aunt Maria?'

'No, nor do I know anyone who did,' shortly returned Mrs. Poynder. 'I think people are moving away very fast, and I am sure Miss Orme must be quite thankful for it, after so very fatiguing a day. Where is Louis, I wonder? Do you see Maude anywhere, Jean?'

'I saw Mr. Orme and her go in that direction, under the trees, not long ago, Aunt Maria.'

Mrs. Poynder hesitated a moment. Surely it must all be settled between them by this time, and she was beginning to feel so tired. 'Will you try to find them for me, my dear? Tell Maude that the carriage was ordered for nine, and the more of us who set the example of leaving the better now for poor Miss Orme's sake. She was looking quite worn out just now.'

Jean started on her errand. Mrs. Poynder looked about for her son, and presently came upon him just emerging from one of the tents with his partner in a waltz just finished. He brought her a chair, and stood leaning over it,

whispering pretty nonsense, whilst he gently fanned her with all the *empressement* of a lover. Really, how trying Louis was, knowing as he did how much depended upon his making way with his cousin just now. 'Louis!' she presently ejaculated rather sharply, 'I want you to see about the carriage; it must be waiting, I think, and you will find us here on your return.'

'All right, mother.'

But she had to wait patiently as she might whilst he whispered a last few words to the laughing girl.

'Ready to go, did you say?' he asked, when at length he turned towards his mother. 'Where are the others? It's no use my seeing after the carriage until they are here.'

'Jean has gone to fetch your sister,' adding anxiously, 'How can you be so foolish as to flirt in that way, Louis? If Jean had been here what would she ——'

'Oh, Jean is all right, mother.'

'Are you engaged? is it settled, then?' she eagerly asked.

'Not exactly, but the way is clear. She has refused Lawrence.'

Mrs. Poynder breathed a sigh of relief. 'But don't you think it is safest to make quite

sure, my dear boy? Some one else may come forward, you know.'

'No fear of that; men are not so ready as all that, and if they were I flatter myself they would have no chance against me with Jean.'

CHAPTER VIII.

BETWEEN THE CUP AND THE LIP.

‘DEAR Maude, I cannot let you go to-night without asking you——’

‘Maude, Aunt Maria sent me to tell you that the carriage must be waiting, and she feels tired and wants to go,’ said Jean, suddenly emerging from a group of trees into a strip of moonlight, where the two were standing.

Maude Poynder’s nerves had been stretched to their utmost tension all day ; in her deep anxiety she had not been able to take any food, and now Nugent Orme had drawn her apart for the third time intending to speak the words she was longing to hear. She saw the white figure emerge like her evil genius from the shadow, felt that the cup was once more dashed from her lips, and swerving aside with an exclamation of dismay, she slipped upon the dewy turf and fell before Nugent Orme could save her.

‘Are you hurt, Maude?’

‘Dear Maude, speak to us!’ they ejaculated, bending over her with anxious looks and ready hands.

She lay without sense or motion amidst a confused heap of lace and muslin, her white face upturned in the moonlight.

‘Dear Maude, are you—She has fainted, I think, Mr. Orme. Will you stay with her whilst I run and fetch something?’

‘Yes; go quick.’

Jean sped away, and Nugent Orme bent tenderly over the inanimate form, with words which poor Maude would have bartered her soul to hear. He was terribly in earnest. Unused to witness suffering of any kind, and still less to suffer, it seemed to act as a sort of touchstone to his innermost nature, bringing to the surface a tenderness which he had not hitherto given others, much less himself, credit for possessing. Womanish weakness he would have designated it an hour before, a weakness to be ashamed of; yet there it was. In the depths of his nature lay a tenderness which was almost more than womanish in contrast with its heights. A low moan was his only answer as with murmured words of love he strove to raise her. Afraid to venture more, he knelt by her side, placed his palms under her head—he could not bear to see it pillowed upon

the turf—and impatiently waited for help. It was quickly at hand.

Jean sped back towards the tents, hastily arranging in her mind what was best to be done as she ran. Aunty must not be alarmed. No, no necessity to tell anyone but just those she required. Louis—a doctor, if one happened to be present—and one woman if she could meet the right one to be useful. Her cousin Louis and a doctor were readily found, the latter and his wife being present as guests, and, for lack of better, Jean herself represented womankind.

‘Be quick, please ; how slow you are !’ she ejaculated, flying in advance of the two men towards the spot where she had left her cousin, carrying a carafe of water and smelling-salts, the latter taken with half an apology from the unwilling hands of she knew not whom, and the other from one of the refreshment tables.

They found Maude still insensible, lying just as she had fallen. Dr. Travers touched her pulse, then stood back a moment studying her position. ‘Be good enough—no, here, Mr. Orme, at the shoulders—now, Mr. Poynder—together ; raise her gently. Only a little, so that I may get her foot from under. That’s well, young lady,’ as Jean lightly bathed her cousin’s temples. Nugent and Louis carefully raised the prostrate girl, whilst

Dr. Travers gently extricated the foot doubled under her, Jean silently giving her help.

‘Oh! let me lie—my foot—my foot!’ groaned Maude.

‘I see. Now flat upon the turf for a few moments. Ankle dislocated, I fear,’ he murmured. ‘Will you run forward and prepare them to receive us at the house?’ he said with a kindly nod to Jean. ‘Leave it to her,’ he added to the anxious men; ‘she knows how to go to work.’ For his professional eyes had quickly recognised the qualities he wanted in Jean. Silence, quickness, deftness, and self-control had all developed themselves to his quick apprehension, as he noted how she had singled out just the help she wanted, made no confidants, and possessed herself of the water and smelling-salts.

Jean hurried forwards on her errand, only stopping a moment on her way to whisper a word to the butler in the refreshment tent. Miss Orme was in the drawing-room, receiving with a very gracious, if rather a worn-out, smile the hundred and fiftieth assurance that this had been the very best of all the Grange fêtes, and altogether the most delightful day in the speaker’s life, really! when Jean slipped behind and tapped the little lady on the shoulder.

‘Miss Orme, my cousin Maude is not very

well, and wants to lie down. May I ask one of the maids to show me a room without taking you from your guests?’

‘Maude? Over-fatigued, I suppose. Of course; she will feel at home here. Ask for my own maid Ford, Miss Raymond.’

Armed with this authority—her only motive for applying to Miss Orme had been to get it—Jean went off in search of Ford. When the little party approached the house with their burden, they were met by the butler and led round to the side entrance, as Jean had suggested, so as to avoid attracting the attention of the remaining guests. Jean and Ford were waiting to receive them, and led them immediately to a spare room, where two maids were busily putting the finishing touches to the arrangements for the sufferer. Maude was tenderly placed upon the bed, and then, excluding all but Jean and Ford, Dr. Travers proceeded to examine the injury. ‘Dislocation of the ankle, accompanied with general exhaustion,’ was his verdict, after a few minutes’ manipulation of the foot. ‘I will remain here whilst you inform our hostess, and see that what I want is brought at once,’ he said, turning towards Jean in the matter-of-course way he would have spoken to a well-trained nurse, sure of being understood and obeyed, and giving her a short list of his require-

ments. Jean found her way to the servants' offices, herself carried up what was required, and then set off to find her aunt and Miss Orme.

They were both in the first excitement of having heard that an accident had happened to Maude somewhere in the grounds, and in a few quiet words she told them the truth, but so told it that it was less alarming than the vague rumours which had reached them.

'Everything is being done, Aunt Maria. Miss Orme was kind enough to give me permission, and dear Maude is being well cared for. Dr. Travers bade me tell you that there is no cause for alarm, and the pain will soon be allayed. He will send word when you can go to her.'

'How did it happen?' asked Mrs. Poynder.

'Quite accidentally, aunt. She slipped as she turned to answer me when I gave your message, and fell with her foot doubled under her.'

In a hurried, nervous way Miss Orme summoned the housekeeper, and issued numerous directions and injunctions respecting the arrangements for her dear Maude's comfort; all of which, armed with her brief authority, Jean had already put *en train*. She begged her dear old friend to remain at the Grange, and use the servants and everything it contained as her own. Then, after a moment's hesitation (she could not very well send

her home alone with Louis), she extended the invitation to Jean.

In time the last guest had got through the last compliment, and only a solitary light in the Grange windows told of the watching within. Dr. Travers had selected Jean and Ford only out of the many who proffered their services to sit up with his patient, excluding even the anxious mother herself.

‘No, no; you want rest yourself, my dear madam, and cannot be of the least service here. I’ve got what I want,’ he added, with a glance at Jean’s quiet face and a nod towards Ford. ‘Young and able to expend a little more in the way of strength than yourself. Try to get a good night’s rest, Mrs. Poynder, with the full assurance that there is not the slightest cause for anxiety.’

He afterwards repeated almost the same words to Nugent Orme, who anxiously awaited him in the library. ‘The young lady and the maid will be quite enough, my dear sir. The former is quite a host in herself.’

‘Miss Raymond!’ ejaculated Nugent in unfeigned surprise. ‘I should have supposed her too—’ He did not like to give expression to the word in his thoughts, and a little awkwardly substituted ‘delicate.’

‘Delicate! not she, any more than a racer is delicate in contrast with a dray-horse.’

‘But——’

‘My dear sir, she has just the kind of strength a medical man is very glad to find and make use of in any emergency like this. I wish it were not quite so rare. Why, that girl had her feelings under control in a moment, and used her wits to manage things quietly for me as well as one of the best trained nurses could have done: no stir in the house, and quietly led in by a side way up to a room already prepared, where there were only three women in the secret, when I feared to find it crowded with foolish people. Then the way she managed the mother and Miss Orme. Pardon me, but elderly ladies are apt to be a little nervous and difficult to deal with on such occasions, you know. The injury? Well, a little tedious probably, but,’ he added, remembering the rumour of an engagement being on the tapis between his patient and Nugent Orme, ‘nothing permanent, no lameness. Oh dear, no, not the slightest danger of that.’

When Jean entered the breakfast-room, to which she was shown the next morning, she found only Nugent Orme there, the two elder ladies being glad to take a longer rest than usual after the fatigues and excitement of the previous day. After

his enquiries had been satisfied respecting Maude, Nugent spoke a few words to Jean more kindly than he had ever yet spoken to her.

‘Dr. Travers tells me that we owe a great deal to your promptness and foresight last night, Miss Raymond.’

She looked askance at him, rather doubtful of this sudden politeness—in truth, expecting some little tag in the way of banter to the compliments—and gave him only a bow for reply.

‘I am afraid I must trouble you to preside this morning, Miss Raymond,’ he went on, with a half-smile at what he took to be a schoolgirl’s shyness. She did not appear very self-possessed just now.

‘Oh, dear!’ thought Jean, wishing herself a hundred miles away; but she took the seat he indicated, and nervously commenced her task. ‘Do you take tea or coffee, Mr. Orme?’

‘Coffee, please. I am really sorry to give you the trouble,’ he said, trying to repress a smile at the idea of this young lady having her feelings under control.

‘Oh, it isn’t the trouble,’ said poor blundering Jean, unmistakably showing *what* it was.

‘What may I give you—omelet? Or do you like a grill—some of this chicken? I am afraid you have overtaxed your strength,’ he added

kindly, as she declined everything but a little cold toast.

‘No, I do not feel in the least tired.’

‘Your appetite is never very good, perhaps?’

‘Oh, yes it is. I am a very hungry girl generally,’ thawing a little to his genial manner—more genial than she had ever yet known it to be; for, whatever his prejudices might be, Nugent Orme was gentleman enough to try to entertain her now she was his guest. ‘Miss Bowles was always complaining about my appetite.’

‘Complaining?’

‘About its being so vulgar, you know.’

‘Miss Bowles was your schoolmistress, I presume?’ glad to have hit upon some subject about which she would speak. ‘You must have found it terribly dull work at school. I think I once heard that you had never had a holiday?’

‘Not out of school, as long as I can recollect.’

‘Then I suppose you found your vacations the dullest times, your companions being away?’

‘I never had any companions. Miss Bowles thought it wouldn’t be right for me to make friends with the other girls, because they were the daughters of gentlemen, and she thought I should have to work for money. She did not know about papa then, or it would have been very different; she told me so.’

‘No doubt. A very sharp lady, your Miss Bowles. I can’t conceive how you managed to avoid doing something wicked.’

‘I didn’t avoid it,’ she gravely returned.

‘Now you have excited my curiosity. Don’t you think you are bound to explain what your idea of being wicked is?’

‘No ; you would not understand.’

Her brown eyes turned meditatively upon him for a few moments, as she thought how little allowance he would make for the ‘Letters from fairy land.’ His own fell, the colour in his face deepened, and for the moment he was at a loss for words, a phenomenon quite new to Nugent Orme. When he presently tried to renew the conversation she had shyly shrunk back into her shell again. But he had succeeded in making her feel the least little bit more at home with him by the time she rose from the table, though he saw she was glad to do so as quickly as possible.

‘Now, if there were really the strength and judgment Travers talks about allied to the simplicity—the simplicity is genuine enough, I begin to fancy—the girl would be an interesting study. But it’s just the mental power which I cannot believe in ; it is merely the innocence of ignorance, I expect, and any uncultivated country girl may have

that.' Then his thoughts reverted to Maude, and Jean was forgotten.

He went to the library, rather restlessly awaiting the Doctor's report. All was going on well, said that gentleman. It was a case requiring little besides patience. Miss Poynder could not be moved for a few weeks, perhaps, but meanwhile he had no restrictions to make beyond the necessity for keeping the foot in one position. Nourishing diet, society, books, what not—her friends might pet her to their hearts' content. They gladly availed themselves of the permission, Miss Orme having a special gift for petting those she loved. Maude found herself surrounded with all sorts of proofs of the love of her friends. Unlike many a poor invalid, barely able to realise kindness, and still less to avail themselves of good things, Maude could enjoy as well as appreciate. The freshest of fruit; all sorts of dainties invented by Miss Orme and the housekeeper; all the new books and reviews, with willing readers when she herself was disinclined for the exertion of turning the leaves; precious little notes from Nugent Orme upon the questions they were mutually interested in—Maude was experiencing all a convalescent's advantages without having gone through the usual probation of pain and suffering. It was so pleasant to lie on the roomy couch, wheeled towards the open win-

dow, and gaze upon the lovely scene beyond, half dreamily listening to the rooks and picturing the time when this would be her home. How foolishly nervous she had been because Nugent happened to be interrupted at the moment of telling his love ! She felt quite ashamed of her weakness, and was glad now to attribute it to physical exhaustion ; she had eaten nothing all day, and was, naturally enough, faint for want of food. Of course it was now the same as though the words had been spoken, and when she was able to make her appearance downstairs she would not again allow any false delicacy to stand in her way. She would herself lead up to the point if he did not, only of course he would. Ah, how hard she would try to deserve the blessing of his love ! how hard she would strive to be a good woman ! So the time went pleasantly on with Maude. She was not naturally inclined to be irritable, and it was so easy to be patient now that the future seemed sure.

After a few days Mrs. Poynder returned to Fernside (there was more necessity for her presence there than at the Grange), leaving Jean to be useful to her cousin, and contenting herself by a daily visit there either from herself or son.

Although Miss Orme was as far as ever from taking very much to Jean, she could not but acknowledge to herself that the presence of a young

girl brought a great deal of sunshine to the old house. In spite of herself the little lady was often amused at the very things she reprehended. Jean's unconscious violations of the conventionalities, her droll surprise when her mistakes were explained to her, her quaint schoolgirl stiffness one ten minutes and apparent disregard of all propriety the next, quite took the little lady's breath away. Then her awkward habit of always asking the reasons for things. No gentlewoman could possibly do this or that; reason all-sufficient for Miss Orme failed to impress this tiresome girl. *Why* couldn't a gentlewoman do this? and *why* could not a gentlewoman do that? would gravely ask Jean.

But, her many defects notwithstanding, it was pleasant to hear the sweet girlish laugh about the house, and watch her flitting about the flower-beds or wandering under the trees in her simple holland dress and broad-leaved hat. Then Miss Orme liked to listen to her playing in the evening; not the playing dubbed brilliant just coming into vogue, but dreamy communings with a world not in the little lady's geography, chiefly approved of for its somniferous effect and capability of being executed in the twilight, which she loved.

Maude was rather desirous than otherwise that her cousin and Nugent should be thrown together.

Had he not told her that she never appeared to so much advantage as when in contrast with the romantic schoolgirl, and had not Jean been always his laughing-stock? So she freely sent the young girl to him with books and messages (she did not know that Jean always availed herself of the mediumship of a servant to do the errands), keeping up a constant communication with him. He was quite as ready as she, sending her little notes about the books they were reading, daily offering of flowers, &c., entrusting them to Jean, who was willing enough to take the replies, though she was shy of carrying the messages to the library, where he seemed almost to live except at meal-times.

Louis Poynder was availing himself of what he termed his freedom according to his taste, contenting himself with looking in at the Grange once or twice a week, and chatting pleasantly with Jean when she happened to be in the way. It was not always; when not with Maude she spent most of her time in the open air, to the detriment of her complexion, although if she caught sight of her cousin Louis, she would run—race Miss Orme termed it—in to talk to him. Indeed, her bearing towards Louis quite scandalised Miss Orme.

‘You must allow me to tell you that it is not at all good taste to use that term in speaking to a

gentleman, Miss Raymond?' she said somewhat stiffly one day at luncheon, when Jean had made some allusion to 'dear Louis.'

'Not if he is my cousin, and I love him, Miss Orme?' said Jean, looking surprised.

'I presume your love is only of the ordinary and proper kind usual between cousins, Miss Raymond?'

'I don't know, I'm sure. I have never known any cousins but my own, so I can't tell what they do; but I've always called him "dear Louis," and he seems to like it, Miss Orme.'

'Gentlemen may say they like it, perhaps; but they cannot have much respect for a young lady who addresses them in that way. I should be very sorry to hear Nugent called "dear."'

'Oh, yes, of course; that would be *quite* different!' hastily ejaculated Jean, blushing violently. 'I'm sure Mr. Orme knows I should never want to!' Turning towards him with tears of vexation in her eyes, she added earnestly, 'You know I should not, don't you? No, not even if you were my cousin!'

'I am quite aware there are cousins and cousins, Miss Raymond; and I am not so conceited as to suppose I should make so good a cousin as Louis Poynder.'

Miss Orme nodded her wise little head. She had made a discovery, and immediately luncheon was over carried the news to Maude.

CHAPTER IX.

NUGENT ORME'S DISCOVERY.

‘I do not wish to make you anxious, my dear Maude; I am sure you know that,’ began Miss Orme, sitting down with great solemnity by the former’s side. ‘Nevertheless, it is clearly my duty to inform you at once, so that you may give your brother a hint to be on his guard.’

‘What is he to be on his guard against, dear Miss Orme?’ languidly enquired Maude, too much accustomed to the little lady’s solemn, important air about trifles to expect anything very astonishing.

‘Are you feeling strong this morning, my dear?’ cautiously asked Miss Orme.

‘Oh, yes; indeed, quite strong enough to hear anything you have to tell, dear. Do not be afraid.’

‘Then I am sorry to tell you that I have discovered symptoms of an attachment, certainly more than cousinly, in Miss Raymond towards your

brother, my dear. I saw at once that not a moment must be lost.'

Maude repressed the smile that rose to her lips, and gravely replied—

'You are so keen-sighted, so very observant, dear; I am quite afraid of you sometimes, really!'

'My dear child, that you never need be; *you* need not fear your most inmost thoughts being read.'

Maude reflected a few moments. If the idea was just growing upon Jean it would never do to let this little busybody frighten her out of it. So she said softly and confidentially, 'Do you know, quite, quite between ourselves——'

'Yes, yes, of course!' eagerly.

'I sometimes think that it would not be so very bad a thing to happen. You see, dear Louis is so very high-principled. I do not think he could be induced to take even a part of my uncle's money now the daughter is acknowledged, though he has always been led to believe it would be all his. And, although he is shy of allowing Jean to see it, lest it might be supposed he were thinking of the money, mamma and I have sometimes fancied of late that he is growing attached to her. If, as you think, Jean returns his love, matters might be very comfortably arranged, might they not?'

‘Miss Orme was silent, trying to get used to the idea, her prejudice against Jean being rather in the way of her doing so.

‘Jean requires a little polish certainly,’ went on Maude ; ‘but I have already observed a slight difference in her since she has been here, and I know it is owing to your influence. You might do an immense deal for poor Jean. So judicious too. You will not, I know, let her suspect for a moment that we desired either to force or prevent the engagement.’

‘No, my dear, certainly not,’ returned the lady with a very judicious air indeed.

‘Fancy your being the first to discover Jean’s love for Louis, dear Miss Orme, after mamma and I having failed ! We were so anxious on his account, you know. How few are gifted with such keen perception !’

‘Flatterer !’ ejaculated the delighted little lady. ‘Might I not say how few are ready to acknowledge any superiority in others ? But rest assured of my using my “gift” in the right way. Leave everything to me, my dear, and we shall have it all settled in due time.’

Maude tried to look satisfied, repeating, ‘I know you will not let her perceive what you have discovered ?’

‘Oh dear, no ; of course not. I will be parti-

cularly careful, and for dear Louis's sake I will do everything in my power to improve her.'

So Miss Orme grew more gracious towards Jean, and endeavoured to believe that the process of improvement had begun, although her sense of propriety was sorely tried, and her power of discrimination more frequently at fault than she would have liked to acknowledge. In truth, Jean's nature was just as perplexing as ever to Miss Orme, who believed that character could be and ought to be made to pattern. There was so much apparent contradiction in her to the little lady's eyes. Where other girls would be shy and retiring, Jean often appeared free to the very verge of boldness, and where they would be free, shy even to awkwardness. Boldness, shyness, conceit, want of proper self-respect, obtuseness, quickness, frankness, reticence—her puzzled little hostess found herself alternately giving the girl credit for possessing all sorts of contradictory qualities.

But someone besides Miss Orme was beginning to feel a little puzzled about Jean.

'Mr. Orme,' she said shyly and hesitatingly to him one morning when he happened to enter the breakfast room in search of a book, and to his surprise found her poring over the 'Times' with an open dictionary by her side, 'would you mind explaining about the national debt to me?

I can't understand what this article says about it, and I want to so much !'

He smiled, highly amused at her attempting a 'Times' leader. 'Are you going through a course of political reading, Miss Raymond?'

'I want to understand how to read politics.'

'And you don't find the dictionary of much assistance?'

'No ; it's no use looking for words when you want ideas.'

He looked at her a little curiously. 'You will find it rather a dry study searching after political ideas. Wouldn't you prefer a novel?'

'Why, of course I should !' she replied, looking her surprise at his asking such a question.

'Then why do you trouble your head with this sort of thing?' lightly touching the 'Times.'

'Because I have to.'

He bowed to such an unanswerable reason, and good-naturedly helped her with an idea or two, giving her a rough explanation of what puzzled her.

A few days later Miss Orme and Jean were in the drawing-room, getting through the interval between dinner and tea, the former dozing over her knitting, and the latter writing a letter, when Nugent Orme entered with a pamphlet he had promised to send to Maude. Finding himself un-

noticed, and not wishing to disturb them, he seated himself on a distant couch, and noiselessly turned over the leaves of the book, marking a passage here and there for Maude's special consideration. But presently his attention was caught by a movement on the part of his aunt. The little lady was sitting very erect in her chair, an expression of severe disapproval upon her face. His eyes following the direction of hers, he saw Jean standing upon a footstool before the chimney glass, absorbed in the contemplation of herself; turning first one side and then the other, examining her face and figure from all points with a grave critical air.

‘Really!’ ejaculated Miss Orme, quite scandalised at such an open exhibition of vanity; ‘you appear very much interested in what that glass tells you, Miss Raymond!’

‘Yes,’ rather absently replied Jean, measuring her nose with her pen. Then, before the little lady had recovered from the shock, she went on, ‘But it is so difficult to judge about oneself. I wonder if— Would you mind telling me exactly what I look like to you, Miss Orme; my face and figure and all that, you know?’

‘Really, Miss Raymond, you are the most peculiar——’

‘Yes, I know; but I meant my looks. Would

you mind telling me, please? Do you think I might be called nice-looking—by some?’

‘There is no accounting for tastes,’ stiffly replied the little lady; ‘but if you wish to have a plain and truthful reply I am bound to tell you I do not think so.’

Jean’s countenance fell. Then examining herself again with rather anxious eyes, she added, ‘I can’t think how it is; Annie Lawrence says my coloured hair and eyes are not in fashion, but my nose is straight and the shape of my mouth is good, if you don’t mind its being rather large. Oh, Miss Orme, how much I wish I were pretty—half as pretty as Maude!’

‘There are other and more serious defects than want of beauty, Miss Raymond,’ returned the elder lady severely.

‘Of course; I know that,’ carelessly said Jean ‘but it seems hard to have none of the right things. You don’t think it would do to say I am nice-looking even—that’s a long way off being beautiful, you know?’ pleadingly.

‘I cannot say what I do not think,’ said Miss Orme very decidedly.

At the moment she really believed that she did not admire the girl.

‘No, of course not.’ And Jean stepped down

from the stool, and slowly returned to her writing again.

‘Cool!’ thought Nugent Orme. But following her with his eyes he saw that tears were dropping upon the paper over which she was bending.

‘Nugent!’ ejaculated his aunt, catching sight of him, ‘I did not know you were in the room. How long have you been here?’ with a glance at Jean. The girl had little supposed there had been another witness to her vanity.

‘About a quarter of an hour or so, Aunt Jemmy,’ and his eyes turned curiously in Jean’s direction, as though to note the effect of his words upon her.

But she showed not the least shame or self-consciousness; merely looked up into his face in a far-off sort of way, with her pen poised in the air, for a few moments, and then went on with her writing.

‘I want this book conveyed to Maude, Aunt Jemmy; will you give it to her and ask her if she thinks she can manage Goethe and Eckermann in the original, or prefers the translation?’

‘Eckermann and Goethe; I will not forget, Nugent.’ And away trotted the little lady up to the invalid, to enlarge to her upon the hopelessness of attempting to improve a girl like Jean. Maude listened to Miss Orme’s description of the scene she

had just witnessed with some surprise. If Jean was vain, the quality had very suddenly developed, she thought. Nevertheless, she was not sorry that Nugent should have been a witness to the exhibition.

As his aunt passed out of the room, Nugent Orme followed her towards the door, then hesitated and turned back a few steps, looking speculatively at the young girl bending over her desk. Of late he had grown a little doubtful whether his first verdict against her had been altogether a just one, and began to feel some interest in solving the question.

‘Are you writing an essay on beauty, Miss Raymond?’

‘No; I am writing about myself to papa, Mr. Orme, and I am afraid he will be very disappointed. In his last letter he seemed so much to want me to be nice-looking.’

‘Would it be an impertinence to ask what you have told him?’ he enquired, led on by her frankness.

‘Oh, no; why should it be?’ She put the letter into his hand, pointing out the passage to him. ‘You are quite welcome to read it, if you care to.’

He did care; a month—a week—before he would have at once declined the offer, with some

little caustic speech about young ladies' correspondence. Now he quietly took the letter from her hand, and glanced curiously at the lines she had just been penning

'I am so very sorry to disappoint you, dear papa. I would give anything to be beautiful for you, but unfortunately I am plain. I hoped that I might perhaps be called nice-looking; I don't look ugly to myself in the glass; but, to be quite sure, I have just asked Miss Orme, the lady with whom we are staying, you know, and she says "No" very decidedly indeed. I do hope you will not mind it when you are used to me and find out how much I can love, and how hard I will try to make you happy. Annie Lawrence once told me that her papa liked having the "Times" read to him, and to talk about politics, so I am reading an article every day to try to understand it before you come.'

He placed the letter upon the table, gazing at her in dumb astonishment a few moments. What a revelation had those few words been to him! She grew uncomfortable and impatient under the grave, earnest scrutiny of his eyes, entirely misinterpreting their meaning. Taking up the letter with an angry little toss of her head, she said—

'Oh, yes, I know; you are going to laugh at me; but I don't care.'

‘But——’

‘Oh, it’s all very well for the people who have had fathers to care for them from the beginning ; but how would you like it if you had just found one, and you’d give all the world to tell him you were what he wanted you to be and had to say you weren’t? What am I to do if he does not love me?’ she ejaculated, turning upon him with flaming cheeks and defiant eyes. ‘What am I to do?’

‘I do not think you have any cause for anxiety about it, Miss Raymond,’ he said, gently. ‘It did not occur to you that my aunt might say what she thought, and yet be no authority on the subject.’

Her tear-dimmed eyes turned upon him a little doubtfully. It was so new to hear him speak in that tone.

‘Will you allow me to say, in all sincerity, that I think you may set your father’s mind at rest without departing from the truth, Miss Raymond? My aunt did not know your motive for asking her the question, and might probably have been afraid of making you vain. Besides, she is as liable to make mistakes as the rest of us, you know. But I assure you that no one could possibly be in earnest in calling you plain, and to a few you would be—’ He paused, looking at the drooping face, and

mentally added—‘gloriously beautiful!’ Yes; that had suddenly burst upon him. To a few, such as could read aright, her beauty would be a religion. As she stood before him, a half-smile quivering upon her sensitive lips, and hope faintly reviving in the wondrous brown eyes, a perception of the subtle loveliness of expression grew upon him, and he could understand why other women’s beauty had hitherto touched him so little.

Still a little doubtful, she presently asked, gazing straight into his eyes, ‘You wouldn’t say it to please me, Mr. Orme? That would be no kindness, would it?’

‘I assure you I have said less than I might have said, Miss Raymond.’

How much less she could not imagine.

With a grateful upward look into his face she extended her hand. ‘I am so glad!’

He took the little hand in his, bowed courteously—it seemed almost reverently—over it, and quitted the room.

‘He is kinder than he used to be,’ thought Jean, taking out a fresh sheet of paper. ‘How nice he is when he is like that. Shall I write another letter?’ she hesitated. ‘No; perhaps it will be better to let papa see what Miss Orme said first, and then tell him what her nephew thinks. That is what I will do.’

CHAPTER X.

IN THE LIBRARY.

THE following morning came a hesitating little tap at the library door. 'Come in,' called out Nugent Orme, stretching out his hand towards his pipe, with the expectation of seeing his aunt. The door opened, and Jean came shyly in, a pamphlet and a note in her hand. 'My cousin asked me to bring this, Mr. Orme. The note will tell you what she thinks about it.'

'You are very kind to bring it.'

'Oh, it isn't kindness,' absently, her eyes straying towards the treasures that lined the walls.

'I think you hardly do yourself justice,' he replied, smiling.

'I meant that I shouldn't come if I did not wish to. I always gave the books and things to Mary to bring before, you know.'

'Then I am very glad you have changed your mind,' he replied kindly, more amused at her out-

speaking, and even the schoolgirl manner, than he would have once believed possible.

‘May I wait while you are writing to Maude, please, Mr. Orme?’

‘I shall be very glad if you will,’ wheeling a chair towards her.

‘No, thank you; I thought perhaps you would let me look at the books?’ and her eyes turned longingly towards them.

‘Pray make yourself at home here in any way you like. I wish I had known you had a taste for reading before; but I hope you will now be friendly enough to help yourself.’ And he took the very best means to make her feel ‘at home by himself becoming absorbed in the reply to Maude’s note.

Nearly half an hour later—it required some reflection and reference to answer Maude’s questions—he suddenly recollected Jean’s presence, and looked towards her. If he had forgotten her, she had also very unmistakably forgotten him. Perched upon the top of the library-steps, with an open book in her lap, and one arm flung over two or three others by her side, as though she were afraid lest they should make to themselves wings and escape, she sat gloating over her treasure, her hair thrust back from her face and her eyes fastened upon the page. How could he have been

so blind all this time as not even to perceive the glorious possibilities in such a face and head as that? he wondered, his eyes dwelling upon the delicate grace of their contour, so well shown by her half-drooping attitude.

‘Have you come upon some favourites, Miss Raymond?’

She slowly raised her eyes, took in the situation, and descended from her perch, her arms full of books.

‘I have never seen them before, only some bits out of this one,’ she replied.

‘Pray accept the freedom of the library from now; take any books you wish, and come here as often as you please.’

‘Oh, Mr. Orme, may I really? May I come when you are out?’

‘If you prefer it, yes, certainly,’ he said, laughing as Nugent Orme very rarely laughed. ‘But,’ he presently added, ‘a moment, Miss Raymond. I see you have got amongst the French authors. Perhaps I ought—May I look? Oh, I see “Corinne.” Yes, that’s safe enough, I suppose; but for the future I must ask you to allow me a voice in the selection. There is a great deal here which you might not care to wade through. What do you say to my making selections for you?’

‘Thank you,’ a little slowly and doubtfully.

‘What’s the reservation, Miss Raymond?’ he asked, quick to note the shade of disappointment in her face.

‘I don’t like selections. We used to have them at school. I should like to go all the way round, and read every one on the shelves, if there were time.’

‘I am afraid you would leave off with a very odd mixture of ideas,’ he replied, smiling. ‘Those shelves are weighted with a mass of contradictions.’

‘I don’t see that it would make very much difference in the end, Mr. Orme; it would only be knowing so many more right things and wrong things than I know now, and that wouldn’t hurt.’

‘Not the knowing more wrong things, as you term them?’

‘No; I don’t see why it should.’

‘I do not quite follow you.’

‘Because I don’t know how to say it in the right way, Mr. Orme. I meant that if you knew things to be wrong, more knowledge of them would not make them seem right.’

‘I see,’ regarding her more intently. ‘But I am afraid you would not find right and wrong quite so distinctly defined and separated as you imagine. They are apt sometimes to run into such fine gradations, and at least appear to merge into each other. Many of the subtle philosophers

there might make you imagine wrong was right as well as right was wrong.'

'Only which I wanted it to be. I must incline one way the tiniest little in the beginning, you know, and all the rest would be only accumulation.'

'I see; but how about freewill? You do not consider yourself responsible for the first inclinations, I suppose?'

'Yes I do; I think I always choose, Mr. Orme, and I would rather be responsible.'

'Ah!' He looked curiously at her. 'You have been reading this pamphlet, Miss Raymond?'

Her eyes fell, and the colour rose to her brow, as she stammered out, 'Cousin Maude gave it to me last night, and said I was to bring it to you this morning, so I thought you wouldn't mind.'

'Mind! I had not the least idea you had a taste for such reading, or——'

'But I haven't a taste for it, Mr. Orme. I like novels, and fairy tales, and poetry, and all that much better; only I had not any to read, and this was better than nothing.'

'But you have read it carefully—critically?'

'I had to read it four times, and look out ever so many words in the dictionary, before I could understand it. It took me till twelve o'clock.'

'But I can't conceive why you should take all

that trouble about a thing that did not interest you.'

'Because I did not understand it,' she said simply. 'And after I had begun it I was not going to stop till I did. It was only like a hard lesson, you know, and I never minded them. I set myself lessons now sometimes, when I haven't anything to read, because I like doing things that are hard to do.'

'You must have been a very good pupil.'

'So I was about lessons. Miss Bowles said she had no fault to find with me in that way; it was the wrong things that came between, you know.'

'But I hope you do not incline most to the "wrong things," or how am I to trust you to the accumulations here?'

'I do not think I do *most*,' she replied, with grave consideration. 'I do not think I ever did much, only I didn't care about being good Miss Bowles's way, and did something wrong now and then just for a change, to try how it felt, you know; but since I have lived with Aunt Maria it has been quite different. I want to be good, and I would give anything to be like my cousin Maude, Mr. Orme. Is this the note I am to give her?' she added, taking it from the table.

'Yes.'

‘And may I take this book for myself?’

‘Take whatever you please. You will not find anything much worse than false philosophy there, except—No, you shall run the gauntlet. There are Scott’s novels in that corner.’

‘All those! I did not know that he had written more than two!’

He was gazing speculatively at her. In truth, he had not quite got over his surprise.

‘You will let me come again?’ she added anxiously, half afraid lest she had said something wrong and forfeited the privilege.

‘Have I not given you the freedom of the library, Miss Raymond?’ he replied, opening the door for her.

She gave him a grateful look and a little half-curtsey, hugging her book to her heart as she went out.

Nugent Orme slowly returned to his seat, and took up the pamphlet again, although it was only to fall into a fit of abstraction over it. Odd that this girl should have hit the centre-point of the writer’s fallacy, when Maude’s quick intelligence had failed to find it. How was it that the writer’s graceful style, and, according to the premisses laid down, logical accuracy, had failed so entirely with the one and fascinated the other? Was Jean one of those gifted with an intuition so rapid

as not only to outstrip, but transcend the ordinary reasoning process—the intuition which constitutes the difference between a genius and an ordinary thinker? Though Jean confessed that she had to labour through the writer's subtle reasoning until she had mastered it, how very little effect it had had upon her judgment. As soon as she had mastered the meaning, she had divined the fallacy. And this was the girl he had so loftily looked down upon, whom they had all ignored! But after all what was it to him? It more concerned Louis Poynder than himself. He took up a mathematical treatise, his usual panacea against troublesome speculations, and resolutely plodded through a certain amount of work. But it had not its customary effect. No sooner had he laid it aside than he found his thoughts straying back to Jean again; and, annoyed with himself, he got up and went out.

Maude Poynder lay upon the couch, the personification of serene content, gazing abstractedly out of the open window, her fingers twining caressingly about Nugent Orme's note, which she had just read for the third or fourth time. How much trouble he had taken to go into the pros and cons of the question; how much respect he showed for her judgment even when he differed from her! Ah, how delightful it would

be by-and-by—the constant communion with a mind like his! She pictured herself spending long hours with him in the dear old library and all that was to come of it. How proud she would be to be the wife of a man who treated a woman as a responsible being, and appealed to her strength instead of to her weakness. If all men were like Nugent Orme women would get their rights without having to fight for them. ‘But,’ she complacently thought on, ‘what are most of the women one meets? They have not enough intelligence to appreciate a greater—only sufficient to feel their own inferiority, and rebel at other people perceiving it.’ For Maude Poynder had not had the opportunity of measuring herself with many really intelligent women, and believed that she was superior to most of her sex. Moreover, she had the weakness which besets many merely intellectual people—the pride of intellect. She little suspected that there was a much finer intellect than her own developing slowly but surely in the girl she so loftily looked down upon. Her own was simply the hard narrow faculty more capable of detecting a flaw in a chain of reasoning than of apprehending the truth or falsity of the premisses. She had not the highest moral perception and was entirely devoid of imagination. She believed herself strong, but she had yet to

learn that intellectual strength does not always ensure moral strength. She had attained the one desire of her heart, and did not speculate as to what she might be were it withheld.

‘So you ventured into the library at last, Jean,’ she said with an indulgent smile at the young girl curled up on the carpet by the window, devouring her book. ‘I cannot understand why you were so terribly afraid of Nugent Orme.’

Jean reluctantly lifted her eyes from her book. ‘I was never afraid of him, Maude. He did not seem kind. It was not kind, if he was ever so clever and I was ever so silly, to be always laughing at me. That wouldn’t help me to grow wiser, you know. But I like him much better than I did.’

‘He ought to feel highly complimented, I am sure.’

‘Do you like him, Maude?’

‘A little—yes,’ a rosy flush mounting to her brow.

‘Ah, he does not make fun of you.’

‘No,’ with a supercilious curl of the well-shaped lips at the idea.

‘I should not mind his laughing at me if he told me why, but it seems stupid if he does it because he thinks himself clever.’

‘He certainly is not stupid,’ returned Maude,

highly amused. 'He could not be both stupid and clever, you know.'

'I meant he would be stupid if he looked down upon others for not being clever, Maude.'

Maude laughed. 'If you take to argue in that way I must succumb of course.'

'I do not see why you need,' simply replied Jean. After a moment's pause she went on, 'But I do not really believe that Mr. Orme is not clever, Maude; I think he made fun of me because he was not kind.'

'Why, that is worse and worse!'

'He is getting much kinder now—quite different. It was very kind of him to say I might have books from the library and change them when I please.'

'What has he selected for you?' a little curiously asked Maude.

'Oh, that's the best of it; I am to select for myself, and go into the library when he is out.'

'Nugent ought to have had more—' she added mentally. 'But I suppose he guessed she would keep entirely to fiction, and there is nothing very dangerous in that way—nothing worse than old-fashioned romances there.'

'I had "Corinne" first, and this is Schiller.'

‘Whose translation?’

‘I read French and German, Maude. I was to be a governess, you know.’

‘Oh, yes, of course. I had forgotten.’ Maude regarded the young girl with languid interest a few moments, thinking how little the knowledge had done for her. But of course it was not a critical knowledge, only the usual parrot learning of second-class schools. ‘She is quite incapable of appreciating Schiller!’ She continued aloud, ‘I am glad to hear that Mr. Orme has won you at last.’

‘The reading part of me, Maude.’

‘And what part has Louis won?’

‘Louis? Oh, he won my whole heart from the first.’

‘You and he appear to appreciate each other. Louis is quite *épris* with you.’

‘I’m glad,’ quietly replied Jean, bending over her book again.

‘The affair seems to be getting comfortably *en train*,’ thought Maude, once more turning her eyes towards the lovely scene without, and falling into a pleasant reverie. It never entered her head to talk to Jean upon any abstract subject. She always looked down upon her as a mere schoolgirl, with whom there could be no thought in common;

and Jean knew almost as little about Maude. They were, indeed, strangers to each other, the only difference being that, in her enthusiastic admiration, Jean overrated her cousin, whilst Maude underrated her.

CHAPTER XI.

ON THE BRINK.

IN her reply to Nugent Orme's note Maude appended a jesting allusion to his getting into the good graces of Jean. 'You are really beginning to be taken into her favour, Nugent. Jean tells me that you have already won the reading part of her, whatever that may mean, by your offer to lend her books. But, seriously, you must look after the child a little, you know. It will never do to let one so untrained to thought roam at will amongst the shelves of the library. You must try to direct her choice a little. You would have been amused just now to see her puzzling over Schiller. For Louis's sake do your best for her.'

Nugent Orme pondered long over this letter, his eyes fixed upon that last sentence. How was it that Maude knew so very little about her cousin? Jean seemed to have quite an exalted opinion of her. He had come to be somewhat

ashamed of his own past grand airs with the girl. How was it that Maude remained blind? Surely she ought to have made a better estimate by this time. For Louis's sake! Was there any real likelihood of that, then? If so, he would strive his best, not for Louis's sake alone, but for Jean's. Throwing aside the letter—he did not know how impatiently—he paced up and down the room in not very pleasant thought.

Since that memorable morning when Louis had been unguarded enough to allow Nugent to get a glimpse into his real nature, they had never succeeded in being on the old footing with each other again. Louis could not quite forgive the other for having, as he termed it, led him on to show his hand and then turned round upon him. It was all very well for Orme to take high ground. He had all he wanted, and could not tell what he would have been under different circumstances. What right had he to set up as a censor of other people's morals? Orme was getting less and less like his old self, and would become a regular prig if he went on at that rate. There were rumours afloat about his attending workmen's meetings in London, setting up a sort of business for helping poor tradesmen and others with small loans, and all sorts of bosh of that kind—evidence that he was degenerating into the conventional good young man.

On his side, Nugent Orme's sentiments towards Louis were undergoing a change. He could not get over that morning's revelation, and, though he tried to appear the same as usual, he was conscious that the effort must be evident to the other. They were each a great deal more ceremonious with each other than of old. In fact, neither could have attempted the old raillery now without becoming personal. The quips, and jests, and laughing rebukes, which are between congenial natures the salt of friendship, become offensive when attempted where friendship is not. For Louis's sake! He, Nugent, was asked to do his best for Jean on the chance that, when Louis had quite made up his mind he could not do without her money, he might throw the handkerchief towards her, whilst he would have preferred 'little Jessie,' as he called her, a girl ready to talk to any man who chose to buy a bag of cakes.

So Maude found the latter portion of her note passed over without comment in his reply. 'Dear Nugent; it was too much asking him to take Jean in hand!' smiled happy Maude.

It seemed that he was not to have the chance, if he desired it. He saw very little of Jean, though he found that she availed herself of the privilege to borrow books; they were taken during his absence. But he amused himself by

watching her reading, not a little curious, as well as amused, at the course she took, which he traced by the gaps left in the shelves—a course growing daily more erratic. ‘From the “Seven Champions” to the old Fathers! What makes you keep amongst them, young lady?’ he mused, following her as she tried one after the other of the ancient folios, and, after an apparent cursory glance, changed it again. ‘Representative men! We are getting a little nearer. Which is it we want? Ah! “A Sceptic upon Dogma.” I must enquire into that, I think.’

So at luncheon he said, ‘I am curious to know why you choose the book you are reading now, Miss Raymond. May I ask?’

She flushed rosy red, and then grew pale again. ‘I did not think you knew,’ she stammered.

‘Nothing objectionable or unfit for a young lady’s reading, I hope?’ put in Miss Orme, looking disapprovingly at the young girl’s conscious, downcast face. ‘What is the book called, Miss Raymond?’

‘A book upon theology, Aunt Jemmy,’ said Nugent Orme, coming to the rescue, and getting a shy look of gratitude from Jean.

‘I’m glad to hear it,’ returned Miss Orme, to whom the word theology was enough. ‘You

should let me make out a list for you, my dear. I dare say there are many books in the library which are not exactly suited for a young girl's reading, though valuable enough to a scholar. I have some much more suitable in my own little collection, which I shall be very happy to lend you; light as well as solid reading—Pollock's "Course of Time," Chapone's Letters, Mrs. Barbauld's works, Hofland's Stories, Kirk White's poems, &c., all excellently adapted for forming character. But I fear you read a little too much. I hear you take books out into the grounds, and——'

'Saunders wants your decision about the old walnut-tree, Aunt Jemmy. He thinks it will have to come down at last.'

'Does he? I will speak to him about it immediately after luncheon,' said Miss Orme, quite alive to the importance of giving a decision. Then she went on to enlarge upon the tree's history to Jean, from the date when it was planted by her grandfather, too much absorbed in the subject to give a thought to anything else.

The following morning was spent by Nugent Orme in sauntering about the grounds, though he did not acknowledge to himself that he had any object in so doing. If he had any latent desire to come upon Jean, it did not seem likely that it

would be gratified. As it neared the luncheon hour he turned towards the house. He had got into the lower grounds, and had to pass the lake, and, when nearly opposite to it, noticed that the boat had been taken over to the island. Was she there? She unconsciously answered for herself; just at the moment emerging from amidst the trees which half hid the temple in the centre of the island, she came down to the water's edge, got into the boat, and rowed herself towards the point where he stood. He might easily have remained out of sight by keeping amongst the trees where he was, had he chosen so to do; but he advanced into the open space, and held the boat's head for her as it touched the shore.

'Mr. Orme!' with a look of not altogether pleased surprise.

'You should let one of the men row you across, Miss Raymond. This boat is too heavy for a lady.'

'Oh, no, thank you. I am a very strong girl, and it would spoil it all if I had to be taken and fetched back again. It's so nice to feel out of everybody's reach.'

'Like a princess on a desert island, I suppose. Do you carry your books to the temple? I must have it made more worthy of such use.'

'No, please do not. I don't care about being

in the temple; it's so tight and neat, and I don't like sitting in a chair. I've found a lovely little nook the other side, where you can't hear a sound but the birds, and cannot see anything but trees and sky and water. I can fancy myself upon a desert island, really, you know. And I've made such a nice *cache* for my books in the hollow of a tree.' Then she recollected that she owed him some thanks for his consideration at luncheon the day before.

'It was so kind of you not to tell about what I am reading yesterday, Mr. Orme.'

'Ah, if you had tried my little finger you would have known you might trust me.'

She laughed out merrily. 'Do you know about that? I thought only schoolgirls crooked little fingers about keeping secrets.' She went on more seriously, 'I did not want Miss Orme to know, because—because she thinks I am not nice already, and I was afraid she might ask me for the title of the book, and say it was not proper for me before I had finished it.'

'I do not in the least subscribe to my aunt's views of what is proper in the reading way, Miss Raymond. Nevertheless, I must acknowledge to feeling some little curiosity respecting your choice of that book.'

She averted her eyes, and, unlike her frank, outspoken self, made no reply. He went on in a

light, bantering tone, his eyes fastened upon her downcast face, 'Will you allow me to ask why you desire to look at things from a sceptic's point of view, Miss Raymond?'

'I did not think you would miss it,' she murmured.

But he wanted his answer. 'I do not fancy you are inclined to be sceptical?'

'No; only I wanted to—see—what scepticism is really like.'

'Why?'

She hesitated a moment, then raised her eyes to his, and blurted out, as she had been accustomed to blurt out her misdeeds to Miss Bowles when it came to the worst, 'I heard Mrs. Cleveland condoling with Mrs. Orme about your being a sceptic; she said her husband sadly feared you were becoming a confirmed one—and I wanted to find out what a sceptic really thinks. The dictionary doesn't help much, you know.'

'I feel honoured by your taking so much interest in my opinions,' he said gravely.

'It is not exactly that. You told me the other day that I puzzled you, Mr. Orme; well, you puzzle me just as much. I cannot understand how it was that I did not like you at first, and I wanted to find out your thoughts about things, so as to know more about you.'

‘But how if you start from false premises—how if Mrs. Cleveland and Mrs. Cleveland’s husband were mistaken in their verdict?’

‘Are you a sceptic?’

‘I am not quite sure.’

‘I would know what I was.’

He smiled, ‘So would I if I could; but the knowledge is not so easily gained by some people as by others; some of us seem to have such complicated machinery. But perhaps I am a little inclined to be sceptical upon some points.’

‘I wouldn’t be a little of anything,’ impatiently kicking a pebble down towards the water.

‘Surely it’s better to be a little than a great deal wrong?’

‘No—I don’t know; I would as soon be—’ Breaking off, she looked up into his face with earnest, questioning eyes, and added, ‘Don’t you *want* the things to be true?’

‘Things?’

‘Don’t you want everything beautiful to be true, Mr. Orme?’ in a low voice.

‘I think I do, Miss Raymond.’ Smiling at her little impatient gesture he added, ‘Well, I am sure I do. But we are not all gifted with precisely the same amount of perception. Some have to go through a slow process of getting at the truth before they see its beauty; whilst

others seem to be in immediate affinity with the beautiful (finding acquaintance there, “as dear old Herbert” has it), and to such the truth comes more readily.’

‘But I don’t see why anyone should want unlovely things to be true.’

‘Things again? Will not you be more definite?’

‘You know what I mean.’

‘Well, perhaps I do; and in that case you must let me say a word for the author you are reading; he——’

‘Oh, don’t; please don’t!’

‘Have you taken such a rooted prejudice against him as all that?’

‘I was not thinking of him, but you. I *want* to like you, Mr. Orme. You have been so kind to me latterly, and Maude says she likes you.’

‘There is all the greater necessity to tell you that I think you have been confounding the meaning of the term sceptic with that of infidel, a very common error in these days, and a very unfortunate one. Scepticism is not infidelity, but something essentially different, the former being merely a state of enquiry, whilst the latter admits of no arguments. Many minds are so constituted that they have to pass through a stage of doubt or scepticism before they can attain any truth.’

‘The author I am reading is an infidel, then.’

‘Why do you think so?’

‘Because he *wants* the things to be wrong. He seems so much more anxious to prove what is wrong than what is right. If he were only a sceptic, as you say, he would be only enquiring after the truth. But he does not. See how glad he is when he thinks he has proved something wrong. I felt just as though he were crowing over me when I got to the fourth chapter, and gave him a good thump—I mean the book, you know.’

‘Blow for blow!’ he ejaculated, highly amused.

‘Is that your creed?’

‘Are you an infidel, Mr. Orme?’

‘Very decidedly not! But I must plead guilty to being as yet only on my way to certain “things,” as you term them; and being only on the way, I pick up all the information I can for and against.’

‘Why against?’

‘Because one likes to hear both sides when a case is to be decided by evidence. You yourself like to do that sometimes, Miss Raymond, or you would have been content to accept the Cleveland verdict against me, you see.’

‘Yes; that is true.’

‘Therefore you are committed to ascertain whether my scepticism is likely to lead to infidelity before you condemn it. You are bound to give a judgment now, and to do it fairly you must go through a little of the kind of reading I indulge in. You will get into a motley company; but you will begin to see a little method in the madness after a while, perhaps. I think I shall introduce you to some of the mystics, to begin with, as a sort of corrective to the rationalism you have just been going through. Old Jacob Behmen will be as good a leap from the author you have been fighting as that was from the “Seven Champions.”’

‘Oh, there’s Louis!’ she exclaimed, suddenly catching sight of him as he advanced from amidst the trees, and running towards him. Then, keeping her hand in his, she turned with him towards Nugent Orme, again looking up into his face, and chattering away like the schoolgirl she still was at intervals, although the intervals were getting wider apart.

‘You have not been ever so long, Louis; three whole days! And I have missed you so much!’

He smiled down into the clear brown eyes, accepting it all very graciously. It was quite right and proper that she should miss him, although he had been far enough from missing her.

‘Three days is not long, you exacting child! Ah, Orme; frightfully hot, isn’t it?’

The two men shook hands.

‘I suppose so, walking in the road. I’ve only been lounging under the trees.’

‘And how do you manage to get through the time, Jean?’ asked Louis.

‘Oh, in all sorts of ways; delightfully, sometimes with Maude and sometimes out—out here generally. Mr. Orme lends me books, Louis, and I’ve found out such a nice place to hide and read them in. I row over to the island, and fancy myself hundreds and thousands of miles away from anybody, and it is so nice!’

‘You don’t pull that great heavy boat yourself?’

‘I have just been telling Miss Raymond that she ought to let one of the men pull her across,’ said Nugent Orme.

‘Of course you ought, Jean. You will quite spoil your hands. I hate to see a woman with coarse hands.’

Jean looked ruefully down at the little ungloved hands, which, though brown enough, could not be justly termed coarse, and said with a sigh, ‘I don’t think they would become white if I were ever so careful, Louis.’

Someone else looked at them, and involun-

tarily wondered how it was that he had ever admired white hands.

‘Maude all right?’ asked Louis.

‘Yes; Dr. Travers says he thinks that she may be able to come down in ten days or a fortnight now.’

‘Meantime you are all doing your best to spoil her, I suppose?’ They walked slowly towards the house, and perhaps a little glad to have Jean to talk to instead of Nugent Orme, who was looking unusually grave, Louis went on, ‘And how goes on the romance, Jean?’

She cast a vexed little side-look up into his face, as she replied, ‘You are always laughing at me now, Louis.’ In truth, he seemed to be adopting the bantering tone which Nugent Orme had once used towards her.

‘But the epic; is it finished yet?’ he laughed.

‘Oh, Louis, please! You shouldn’t tell about me, when you said you wouldn’t.’

‘Are you writing a poem, Miss Raymond?’ said Nugent Orme, glancing at her flushed face.

‘I tried to make some verses once, but they wouldn’t finish.’

‘Very unkind of them, wasn’t it, Orme? And how about the picture? Have you sent it to

one of the exhibitions, or would that also not finish?’

‘Oh, Louis, that is not fair, because you found that little etching! There is no harm in trying, is there Mr. Orme? Besides, I cannot help it. Don’t you feel sometimes as though the beautiful things were worrying you to say something about them, Louis?’

‘I can’t say that I do.’

‘Then it’s because I’m a girl, I suppose. Maude says it will go off as I grow older, but it hasn’t begun to yet.’

‘But you should not encourage it, Jean. Romance and all that sort of thing may be excusable, perhaps, in a girl of fifteen; but it is at no time attractive, and a romantic woman is a “caution,” as the Americans say.’

‘I should not like to be a “caution,”’ gravely returned Jean. ‘I wonder why it is so wrong to be romantic? Loving beautiful things cannot be wrong.’

‘At best it is only a lazy habit to be dreaming away your time over them.’

‘Ah, no; they do not let you rest long enough to be lazy; you are soon set to work again finding out.’

‘Finding out!’ he repeated impatiently. ‘If you do not take care you will become eccentric, Jean! I can’t endure eccentric women.’

She slipped her hand into his again, looking pleadingly up into his face. What made him like this, almost as though he were cross with her? What had she done? He smiled graciously down at her, patting the little hand, and thinking how manageable she would be by-and-by.

Nugent Orme walked gravely on. Was it true, then—was this—this *priceless* jewel to be cast before swine? The other's complacent tone of proprietorship was insufferable to him, and he believed that it was simply Louis Poynder's unworthiness and want of appreciation that angered him. He glanced at the eloquent face, unconsciously budding into beauty as the soul struggled to free itself from the childish bonds which confined it. God help her, if she sacrificed herself whilst her perception was but half developed. And yet—the girlish freedom of her bearing towards Louis was more like that of a sister towards a brother than anything else. When love came it would not develope in that way—surely not in a nature such as hers! And Nugent Orme found great relief in the conviction—for Jean's sake.

CHAPTER XII.

FIRST LOVE.

THE luncheon moment (Miss Orme's time was precious enough to be counted by moments) was exceeded by a full minute and a half when the three reached the dining-room. But Jean was spared the lecture prepared for her upon want of punctuality when the little lady saw Louis. A certain allowance must be made for lovers—when the right kind of people fell in love with each other. Fancying Louis was a little cross with her, Jean tried her best to conciliate him during luncheon, and although Miss Orme did not admire her very open way of showing her love for her cousin, she now quite approved her feeling it. Had not she, Jemima Orme, decided that the match was to come about? She carried a glowing account of the promising state of things up to Maude, as soon as Louis had taken his departure.

Maude listened complacently enough. She did not at all object to other people being happy, and

when she went downstairs it would be just as well that Louis and Jean should be absorbed in each other, and take themselves out of the way. According to Miss Orme, Jean's was certainly an odd way of showing her love. To Maude's refined taste it seemed to show great want of delicacy for the girl to be letting everyone see her partiality at this early stage. But then Jean always had been peculiar. 'I never knew anyone so utterly regardless of the *convenances*. I really should not be much surprised to hear that she had taken the initiative and told Louis she loved him before he asked her. Nugent's opinion of her was evident enough.' His uniform silence respecting Jean—even when she challenged him with some good-humoured little jest about the girl—was expressive of a great deal from one of his calibre, thought Maude. But presently she looked a little doubtfully at Miss Orme. 'You think it is really love, dear? Jean has always been very attached to Louis, and frank in her manner towards him.'

'We shall see, my dear; time will show,' nodded and smiled Miss Orme. Time soon began to show a great deal to those that could read. Had Maude felt more interest in Jean she might have noticed how different she was becoming to her former self as days went on. Her character had

been slowly developing ever since her arrival at Fernside ; but this was some new kind of development. She still had occasional little *divertissements* of fun and frolic ; but during the intervals she was silent and abstracted, shrinking shyly away from notice, passing her time in a way which nothing but love for her cousin Louis would have justified in Miss Orme's eyes. In truth, Jean was revelling in a new existence—the tender delight of first love, returning again and again to take a shy peep through the gates of Elysium, and advancing a little nearer each time, half conscious that she carried a key in her bosom with which to unlock them at will. This was what the stars and trees and flowers had tried to tell her when she had stood vaguely wondering and admiring apart ! Now every beautiful thing that lived and grew seemed to take her into its confidence. She spent most of the long days out in the open air (Maude could bear her absence philosophically enough, and Miss Orme was immersed in her multitudinous occupations), her senses steeped in the summer glories about her, her imagination feeding to almost dangerous excess upon the dainty food presented to it. When obliged to make her appearance she shyly slipped out of notice as much as possible, guiltily conscious of her secret. But the truth was writing itself on her face to those that could read

the new light in the brown eyes, the soft, tender, surprised look of the soul timidly stepping into womanhood and love together, the very voice melodiously softening and trembling with the rhythm of her thoughts. Unaccustomed as she was to dissemble, every look and tone told her secret.

It was a lovely July evening. Jean had softly improvised Miss Orme into her afternoon nap, and herself wandered into dreamland, her eyes turned towards a last streak of gold where the sun had sunk behind the distant hills, whilst the soft summer moonlight stole in through the open windows to lie at her feet.

‘For then thy soul did beckon unto mine,
And then my soul went trembling out to thine.
Then I began to live.’

‘Are those the words to your music, Miss Raymond?’

‘Mr. Orme!’ she ejaculated, with a startled, guilty look, scattering the moonbeam into broken, quivering lights about her, as she hastily rose from her seat and peered into the shadow.

‘I like to listen to your playing.’ How many nights had he quietly entered, and sat unsuspected and unperceived listening to her!

She stood silent, asking herself in a nervous, frightened way what he had heard. What had she

done and said? Perhaps he suspected the cause of her fear. He went on kindly, 'But I did not feel privileged to hear more than your playing. Whose music have you been playing to-night?'

'Oh, anybody's, anything,' she replied, nervously shrinking into the shadow. 'Miss Orme likes it because I play without lights, and it sends her to sleep.'

'I do not exactly sleep, my dear,' put in the little lady, catching the latter part of Jean's sentence; 'but I enjoy a little quiet reflection in the twilight. When you have gained a little more experience you will, I hope, perceive the advantage to be derived from cultivating a habit of reflection. I should never have done what I have had I not accustomed myself to carefully weigh and consider the consequences of my actions.'

Jean felt that Nugent Orme had noiselessly quitted the room, and, greatly relieved, tried to do her share towards what the little lady called conversation until tea and lights made their appearance. So Miss Orme rambled on, devoting the half-hour to Jean's improvement, quite satisfied with an occasional monosyllable from the young girl in reply.

When tea made its appearance Louis Poynder came in, and presently afterwards Nugent Orme. The former had come, at his mother's anxious sug-

gestion, to do a little love-making ; but, rather out of humour at having to give up an evening just now (why couldn't they let him have his freedom until she returned to Fernside?), he went through the process as though under protest.

'Are not you well, Louis?' asked Jean. Of late, since words had come to have a new meaning to her, the 'dear' had been left out in speaking to her cousin.

'Not very,' he grumbled. 'A wretched headache.' In truth, the effects of the previous night's excess in drinking and smoking clung about him more pertinaciously than usual.

'I am so sorry. May I get you anything—some eau de Cologne?'

'No; strong coffee is the best thing.'

Begged by Miss Orme to make himself at home, he reclined in an easy chair, and allowed Jean to wait upon him.

She brought his cup to his side, placing it on a little table within his reach, and he lazily gave her a little nod for thanks. Then his eyes dwelt upon her face for a moment, and something—he hardly knew what—aroused his attention.

'Why, what's come to you to-night, Jean?' he said, staring at her with puzzled eyes.

'Come to me?' she echoed consciously.

'Yes. How brilliant you look!'

‘There’s no difference,’ she murmured, the long lashes drooping over the tell-tale eyes. ‘This is the same dress you have seen me wear before.’

No, the brilliance, or whatever it was, was not owing to what she wore. She had on a simple white, sprigged muslin dress, made high to the slender throat and close to the wrists, with nothing in the shape of ornament save a dead-gold locket suspended to a small chain, and a few geranium blossoms at her waist. He was quite aware that the difference was not in her dress. She had emerged from the schoolgirl stage of existence at last, and was vastly improved by the change, to say nothing of a certain something else which was equally apparent to him, and equally approved.

‘I did not mean it was owing to your dress, child,’ he said, catching hold of her hand and complacently enjoying her confusion. ‘Why, Jean, you are getting good-looking!’

She stood consciously flushing and paling, striving in vain to withdraw her hand from his grasp, whilst he lay back in his chair lazily regarding her, critically appraising every feature and tint and expression—the soft, rosy blush, in its way almost as pretty as Jessie’s more vividly contrasted pink and white; the hair, which, though brown instead of flaxen, had so much gold in it; the delicate yet firm contour of the face and head, and the unde-

niably graceful figure—coming to a more satisfactory conclusion respecting the separate items than he had hitherto done. Some men might style her almost handsome. Smiling up into her face, and taking no heed of her efforts to free her hand, he went on in a low voice, ‘If you would take a little more pains with yourself you would be positively good-looking, Jean. Why don’t you dress your hair in the new way?’ (she wore it coiled in great twists about her head, notwithstanding the fashion just setting in for puffing and frizzing). ‘It would suit you capitally.’

‘Don’t,’ she murmured. ‘Louis, please let me go.’

‘What are you blushing so furiously about, child? Why, what a tell-tale face you have got, Jean!’

‘You are unkind. Let me go.’

‘First promise me that you will try the new way of dressing your hair. Come, say you will to please me,’ he said, holding her hand fast and highly enjoying her confusion.

‘I cannot, Louis. I tried when you wanted me to before, but it was such a trouble and made my head hot, and I got into a temper.’

‘Was it the frizettes or the temper that made your head hot, child? Come, promise me to try again?’

‘No,’ decidedly, though in a low voice.

‘Not to oblige me?’ getting a little impatient.

‘I don’t want to disoblige you, Louis, but——’

‘You won’t oblige me?’

‘I don’t want to do my hair differently,’ she murmured.

He looked another moment or two at her half-averted, blushing face, and came to a conclusion which satisfied himself. He remembered having once told her (before the fashion changed) that she wore her hair very becomingly arranged. That any other person might have told her the same, or having told her, could have sufficient influence to prevent her altering the fashion of her hair, never occurred to him.

‘Jean, dear, we are waiting,’ gently put in Miss Orme, having, as she thought, given them quite indulgence enough for the time being.

Louis lifted the little hand still struggling in his grasp to his lips, and then released it. ‘I suppose I must let you have your way this time, little tyrant.’

‘I’m not little—and—and I wish you wouldn’t speak to me in that way.’

‘What way, child?’

‘It’s the tone or—something.’ She was hardly conscious what it was that jarred upon her.

‘Nonsense; don’t be critical, Jean,’ taking up.

his cup with half a yawn. He must not allow her to grow exacting.

Jean entered into the fuller light round the table with a hot blush still burning in her cheeks. How grateful she felt that Nugent Orme seemed too much absorbed in the review he was reading to notice her. She did not know that one quick glance had taken note both of Louis's little demonstration and her own confusion.

'Bring me some more coffee, Jean,' presently said Louis. She slowly carried it towards him, but this time could not be induced to remain a moment longer than was necessary to place the cup by his side. 'I must teach her not to be so skittish,' he thought, 'when I take her regularly in hand. Some fellows like all that sort of thing, but I don't.'

CHAPTER XIII.

IN THE WOODS.

MISS ORME had seen quite enough to set her mind completely at rest. The following morning she informed Maude and her mother (the latter had come over to spend a few hours with her daughter) that there could no longer be any doubt about it. Jean was deeply attached to her cousin. 'I told you that you might leave everything to me, you know, my dears,' smiled the little lady, feeling that she had brought it all about. 'You should have seen them last night. Quite lovers, I assure you. Between ourselves, they were quite demonstrative. Nugent looked almost shocked.'

'Then Louis did come last night?' said Mrs. Poynder, with a momentary look of relief; for though she had begged him to go to the Grange, she was by no means certain that he had done so. Poor Mrs. Poynder was looking terribly harassed. Unfortunately she could not ease her mind by opening her heart, and hers was a mind naturally

requiring many props in the way of sympathy and encouragement. But she knew how angry Maude would be if she were told about her brother's entanglements. Dear Maude was herself so strong, and superior to temptation of any kind, that she did not make quite sufficient allowance for poor Louis. Young men were so beset with temptation. Then, as dear Louis said, his uncle's cruel conduct about the money had affected his prospects so much more than Maude's. The latter would not feel the loss of the money when she was Nugent's wife, whilst, at best, poor Louis would be forced into a marriage with a girl he did not care about (he had been very open with his mother upon that point), and owe everything to the generosity of his wife. Therefore, although she was gratified to hear that Jean was in love with her cousin, since the marriage was a necessity, she was not so much elated about it as Miss Orme, and perhaps Maude, expected her to be.

‘How is Louis going on, mamma?’ asked Maude, with a sharp side-glance at her mother's anxious face, when Miss Orme had presently pleaded her important morning duties, and bustled away to attend to her flowers, and do what old Saunders irreverently termed her half-hour's mischief in the garden. ‘How anyone as had a eye for flowers could aggravate them in the way the

missis did wi' they scissors,' puzzled Saunders. And yet the old man could not find in his heart to utter a stronger expression of his disapproval than a grunt when the little lady pointed to the promising shoots in her basket as a proof of her industry, her face radiant with good-humour.

'Going on, dear?' repeated Mrs. Poynder. 'Oh, very well—the same as usual.'

Maude noted the averted face, and nervous, fluttering hands, and drew her own conclusions. 'A good thing for Louis, Jean's taking it into her head to fall in love with him. But take my advice, mamma; urge him to have it settled as soon as possible.'

'He won't bear much urging, you know, dear.'

'And yet he hasn't sense enough to act without it.'

'It *is* rather hard for him to have to look to his wife for what he has always been taught to consider his own, Maude.'

'It would be a great deal harder for him to have to do without the money. He is quite sharp enough to know that. Besides, she will do quite as well as anyone else for him. He is not likely to be very exacting—unless he married a superior woman. So long as his wife fancies him perfect, and falls down and worships him, he won't be hard upon her little weaknesses. But tell him from me

that he is very unwise to delay the engagement. If uncle Oliver should take it into his head to surprise us by coming back unexpectedly, he might also take it into his head to make a few enquiries about Louis' tastes and habits before giving his consent, supposing he keeps in his present mood about the girl. He might object to such little escapades as——'

'I will tell Louis what you say, dear;' hurriedly put in Mrs. Poynder. 'I quite think with you that the engagement ought to be settled as quickly as possible.'

'I wish you would try sometimes to think a little *without* me, mamma. You would not then get talked over by Louis as you do. I expect to find money matters in inextricable confusion when I return. He manages to get every penny out of you as soon as it comes in.'

To which poor Mrs. Poynder could only reply by murmuring a few indefinite words. Then, anxious to begin a fresh topic, she said, with a conciliatory smile, 'When am I to congratulate *you*, dear Maude? Your future promises to be quite unclouded.'

Maude smiled. 'Nugent and I look at things from the same point of view; a very different one to most people's, mamma.'

'Ah, yes; you are so admirably suited to each

other ; both so clever and with exactly the same tastes.'

'Don't forget to tell Louis to make sure.'

Trotting about with her basket of snippings, Miss Orme caught sight of her nephew slowly pacing one of the alleys, and hastened towards him. 'Ah, Nugent, dear, I am glad to see you out. So much better than poring over books this hot weather. It is studying so much that has made you look so pale and depressed latterly. Only yesterday Mrs. Cleveland was saying how very unlike yourself you have been looking of late, and I told her I felt sure it was over-study. You will not have long to wait now for a companion ; Dr. Travers says dear Maude may come down to-morrow or the next day. He wanted to make quite sure, or she might have ventured a week ago. Really my hands will be quite full with two pairs of lovers to manage ! I suppose Louis has told you that it is as good as settled between Jean and him. They made it evident enough last night, did they not ? I do not quite approve of cousins marrying ; but this is an exceptional case. As dear Maude says, it is better that Louis should get his rights so than not get them at all. Are you going *that* way, Nugent, dear ? It is nearly luncheon time, you know.'

He muttered something she did not hear, and

strode away. Turning through the plantations he made his way towards the woods, disregarding the path and pushing blindly through the underwood, as though taking a sort of fierce delight in battling against some obstacle. He did not make his appearance at luncheon. Mrs. Poynder had been with some difficulty persuaded to stay, and hastened her departure afterwards as much as possible. She was restless and uncomfortable about her son; anxious to act upon Maude's suggestion as soon as possible. And, besides, the Indian mail was due; letters might arrive by the afternoon's post, and they might contain news of importance to them all. There was always the chance that Oliver might change his mind again, and do justice to her children as well as to Jean. Miss Orme accompanied her in the pony carriage, and on her return found Jean standing in the middle of the road impatiently watching for her. But no time was given for the intended lecture upon the impropriety of the proceeding. Before the little lady had time for a word Jean sprang on to the step of the carriage, caught the letter from her nerveless fingers, and with a joyous laugh ran off with it.

Into the grounds and turning to the left towards the woods, on she sped, clasping the precious letter to her heart, until she had penetrated far into the leafy solitude. Pale and almost

breathless with excitement, she sat down upon the trunk of a fallen tree and opened her letter.

‘Oh, the joy of it, papa, darling! the joy of it! It only wanted this!’ she ejaculated, after hurriedly glancing through it. Holding it against her cheek, her eyes full of delicious tears, she laughed and nodded to the trees and ferns. ‘Remember your first leaves, dear; think when the sun first kissed you, darling, and laugh with me!’

A shadow from behind blotted out a streak of sunshine, which had found its way through the boughs to kiss her hands. She turned, and saw Nugent Orme moving hastily and silently away.

‘Mr. Orme! Oh, I’m so glad! Don’t go,’ she impulsively went on. ‘Do come and help me to bear it.’

‘Trouble?’ he exclaimed, turning sharply towards her. ‘Oh, no, I see,’ he added, with a short laugh at his own absurdity, as he glanced at her radiant face.

She tapped the tree by her side. ‘Come and let me tell you.’

He slowly and hesitatingly advanced a few steps, paused again, and finally sat down by her side.

‘He’s coming home to me!’

‘Mr. Raymond—your father?’

‘Yes ; soon, in a week or two from then, that means nearly now.’

‘A week or two from then means nearly now ?’

She laughed out joyously. ‘Was ever so much happiness? May I read some of it to you? do let me.’ And she proceeded to flatten out the letter upon her knees, and read little scraps out to him, fancying he heard them.

Could she have seen the eyes fastened upon her downcast face !

“I am glad to find that you do not consider your education to have been finished at school, and that you seem in earnest about trying to improve yourself. But I trust you do not encourage the tendency which I regret to perceive in your letters towards romantic notions about people and things, and that—”’ She stopped, giving a shy look up into her companion’s grave face, unconscious that he had not heard the beginning of the sentence, and that she might have left out the rest without his being any the wiser.

Fancying that she stopped because she observed his abstraction he hastily gathered back his thoughts, and said quietly, ‘I am listening.’

She sat silent a few moments, her eyes shyly veiling themselves, a rosy flush dying her cheeks, and a happy conscious smile upon her lips ; then

she pointed out the sentence for him to read it himself.

‘Do you wish me to read it?’ he said gently, striving hard not to look at her—not to indulge in the dangerous intoxication of the moment.

She nodded—turning her face away—and he read aloud—

‘“Your Aunt Maria seems to hint that there is some love nonsense going on; but I hope your time is better employed. Try to occupy yourself with some useful, woman’s work, and prevent your mind from dwelling upon such things, which are only weaknesses at your age, and for some time to come.”’

‘Very good advice, only it comes a little too late, does it not, Jean?’ He had forced himself to say something, though he hardly knew what; quite unaware that he had used her Christian name or that there was anything unusual in his way of speaking.

Her soul vibrated to the tenderness of his tone—as he unconsciously dwelt upon her name. She swayed towards him, bowed her blushing face upon his arm, and lifted her father’s letter to his lips.

‘Great Heavens!’

‘What is it?’ she asked; nestling closer to his side, and looking nervously round, then up into

his face from which every vestige of colour had fled; misery and a sort of wild delight fiercely battling for the mastery in his eyes. 'Are you ill?' sinking her voice, 'Nugent?'

He put her from him; gently, tenderly, ah, how lingeringly, but *from* him; and stumbled blindly to his feet. She rose and stood white and still before him—waiting. She knew now, in a numb sort of way, that some blow was to come.

'God help us!'

'Us—us?' Her heart began to beat again.

'I believed it would only fall upon me!' he muttered. 'How can I bear it if she, too, must suffer!'

'Suffer? If there is anything to be suffered may not I bear it with you—Nugent?'

'God help us!' he repeated, gazing at her with miserable yearning eyes; but not daring to venture a step towards her.

'Is it because of what papa says, Nugent? He will not mind when he knows how much I—'

'Hush, Jean—child—you must not go on.' In his misery he added, 'How do you know that I—Oh, Jean, have I let you see my love?'

A shy smile parted her lips as she whispered, 'Yes.' Had not his every look and tone told her; had not her own love taught her to read the signs? Even now, though she saw that some trial was

impending, she did not for an instant doubt his love.

‘God forgive me. How shall I tell you? I believed myself in love with Maude Poynder, and for years our engagement has been looked upon as a matter of course. She expects me—she has a right to expect me—to ask her to be my wife.’ He flung his arms along the spreading branch of a tree and buried his face upon them.

‘Cousin Maude!’ she whispered, white and trembling. ‘And I have come between you—Oh, Nugent, you *let* me do it!’

‘They said you were the same as engaged to your cousin.’

‘Louis!’

‘And—the possibility of this did not occur to me, how could I suppose—Jean, you do not think me capable of trying to gain your love whilst I was engaged to another woman?’

‘No, Nugent.’

‘I thought I was strong and tried to satisfy myself with some wretched sophistry about being able in time to bury my dead and act honourably to poor Maude. God help me, Jean, I little thought that it would be at the cost of wronging you!’

‘You have not wronged me, and you will be honourable to Maude.’

Yes ; that was her decision, no other could be expected from her, he knew that, and if possible loved her the better for knowing it, the sharp agony it cost him notwithstanding. But to have brought this shadow upon her young life ! ‘To have brought this upon you, Jean—I that would gladly lay down my life to—’ He broke down once more.

She laid her hand upon his arm : ‘Do not be troubled about me, Nugent, I am not sorry for having loved you if it does no wrong to Maude, and we will be true to her now !’

He looked down at her drooping face with tender yearning eyes. But one—only one kiss upon the sweet brow ! But Nugent Orme was stronger than he gave himself credit for being, and stood apparently passive beneath her touch though his heart was beating heavily.

‘Jean ! Jean !’

‘We must never meet again—like this.’ Then in her tender loving anxiety to exonerate him she added : ‘But you must not blame yourself, Nugent ; indeed, indeed, I do not blame you.’

‘Jean ! Jean !’

‘Say good-bye to me, Nugent.’

He was battling against his lower self, and no word would come from his parched lips.

‘Good-bye,’ she whispered, turning away.

Haggard and exhausted but victorious he placed his hand upon her bowed head and mentally bade good-bye to all that was truest and best, and loveliest to him in the world, then said gently, 'God keep you, Jean.'

She lifted his passive hand to her lips and was gone.

CHAPTER XIV.

MAUDE'S FLOWERS.

WHEN the second bell rang, Jean crept down with throbbing heart and lagging steps to the dining-room. How could she meet him? Ah, if she could only have absented herself from the dinner-table that once! How hard it had been to resist the inclination to plead a head-ache, or what not, and remain in her own room. But he must never know how heavy her burden was to bear—she must spare him that. Fortunately the long discipline at Ivy Lodge was of some service to her now. She had not been accustomed to abstain from doing a thing because she disliked doing it. To her great relief she found Miss Orme alone.

‘I do not know what has become of my nephew. He is getting rather irregular about meals, I am afraid. He did not come in to luncheon, but it is very unusual for him to be absent at dinner. Dear Nugent, I noticed that he was not looking quite himself this morning. He

is naturally inclined to be rather delicate, too, though no one would suppose it by his appearance. But for my unceasing care he might not have lived to manhood,' sighed the little lady; daintily enjoying the idea as a sort of relish to her chicken, and going on to comfort herself with the reflection that it was wrong to be over-anxious. 'He may have stayed in the town, or been prevailed upon to dine at Fernside, or something of that kind, you know, my dear.'

Jean murmured something in assent.

'You are looking paler than usual, yourself, my dear,' said the little lady kindly. Fortunately for Jean she complacently went on to account for it in her own way, deciding that the young girl was too much out in the heat of the day.

'Do not you feel well enough to play a little to-night, Jean?' she asked, missing the usual accompaniment to her after-dinner nap, when an hour later they had returned to the drawing-room, and had been sitting some time silent in the twilight. The elder lady was reclining in her favourite low chair near the window, and Jean sat with downcast eyes and hands folded in her lap, on a couch behind her.

'I will try,' murmured the girl, rising from her seat. She stood a few moments nervously clasping and unclasping her hands, then tossing

them above her head, sank back on to the couch again, burying her face in the pillows in mute agony. Did a faint sigh reach her, or was it the subtle divination of his presence? She sat up, peered into the shadowy part of the room, then tremblingly rose. Should she add to his pain? Ah, no, not for a thousand worlds! Slowly she made her way to the piano, sat down and played a few simple school airs. She dared not trust herself to let her thoughts flow into melody, though she longed to comfort him, her tender woman's heart yearning to add his share of suffering to her own.

'That little Scotch air is very pretty,' said the little lady, between her naps.

'You are improving, I think, Jean.'

Poor Jean! It was as though she were complimented upon being paralysed. But she strove on, plodding mechanically through the learner's first book, which she had been accustomed to teach the younger girls at Ivy Lodge, until tea and candles were brought in.

'Mr. Orme was taking his coffee in the library, and begged that the ladies would excuse him not joining them,' was the message given to Miss Orme.

'Has your master dined out, Robert?'

'I believe so, ma'am. He has not long returned, and only ordered coffee.'

‘I will speak to him,’ said Miss Orme, trotting importantly off on her errand.

In a few minutes she returned with a satisfied face. ‘Dear Nugent is very well he says, only a little tired; so we must excuse him to-night. I have been telling him he is getting a little impatient at the length of the separation from dear Maude, although I could not blame him for it. Of course you know that she is going to be his wife, my dear.’

‘Yes—I know.’ With a half-strangled sob at the thought of what the knowledge had cost her. How she longed to make her escape, how interminable to-night seemed the hour devoted to knitting and conversation between tea and prayers! At half-past ten, the servants filed into the room, and Miss Orme went enjoyably through the customary prayers and chapter and little homily; gently impressing upon her hearers the sin of coveting the good things of this transitory life, and their bounden duty to be content with that state of life they had been called to walk in. Then gazing benignly at them over her gold-rimmed spectacles, a bright example of content with things as they existed, she gave them the bow of dismissal with a quiet conscience.

Free at last, Jean hurried away to her room, locked and double locked the door, flung herself

on to the ground and gave vent to her misery, suffering with all her young strength ; but, though she knew it not, suffering healthily. She had not learned the art of comforting herself by blaming others or railing at cruel fate. The sorrow had come, and it had to be borne. She bore it like a child—with the wild childish hope that the agony would kill her. Surely it would not be possible to go on living like this very long ! She did not know her capacity for endurance, or imagine how far it had yet to be tested.

When at length she sank faint and exhausted on her pillow she almost fancied that her prayers for those she loved might be her last. Poor Jean, she awoke refreshed by her long sleep, and even hungry, her misery notwithstanding.

How could she meet him ? She recollected having once told him that she was glad he could so easily read her thoughts, because it spared her the trouble of telling them. ‘ But if I could only hide them now ! ’ she murmured, looking nervously at the tell-tale face in the glass—the white cheeks and heavy dark rimmed eyes, in which all the life and light seemed quenched. She rubbed her cheeks trying to bring a little colour into them. Should her white face blame him ? Ah, no ! He must never know how terrible the blow had been ! She managed to enter the breakfast-room and get

through the morning greetings with tolerable steadiness, placing her hand a moment into his as they met. But after one upward glance into his grave-set face, she did not venture to look towards him again. She had enough to do to keep up some semblance of self-control. He did his best to help her by drawing his aunt's attention to himself; asking questions about her schools and *protégées*, and appearing much interested in her elaborate explanations. 'If only she does not notice the difference in his voice,' thought Jean. 'Ah, the terrible difference of these hard even tones!' Fortunately, Miss Orme was very little observant of intonation, and was besides quite unaware of her nephew's capabilities in that way. *She* had never heard anything like that.

'Jean! Jean!'

'Poor little Mary Butler has been obliged to remain at home to wait upon her invalid mother the last three weeks, and so lost her chance of the prize for regular attendance. Rather hard for her, isn't it, Nugent!'

'You must set matters straight by giving her a prize for what she has done out of school, Aunt Jemmy.'

'But would that be quite right, Nugent, dear, unless—. Well, I might make her a present for her kindness to her sick mother, perhaps.'

‘A capital idea.’

At which the little lady perked herself up; as though she always kept a stock of capital ideas on hand, and the production of one was mere child’s play.

When at length—Miss Orme rather delayed the process to enjoy the somewhat novel pleasure of a talk with her nephew—the meal had been got through, Jean rose from her seat with a half-smothered sign of relief. She had reached the door when she recollected what had come to be her morning’s custom, and looked towards the little side-table, upon which she had hitherto found a bouquet placed ready for her to carry to Maude. There were no flowers this morning. She stood a moment gazing at the vacant place, twining her hands tightly together, then turned towards him and said in a low but steady voice, ‘Will you give me the flowers for Maude, Mr. Orme?’

His hand tightened over the back of the chair it rested upon, and his eyes fell. Miss Orme made a little jest at his forgetfulness this last morning.

‘I suppose you are waiting to give them yourself, Nugent. But I think you had better send them as usual, lest she should be prevented coming down. Dr. Travers said he thought she might venture; but it is better not to depend too much

upon seeing her in case he should advise another day's delay when he comes. And, in any case, she may expect her flowers, you know.'

He murmured something about the 'best being dead.'

'Dead!' ejaculated Miss Orme. 'My *dear* Nugent—in August! I never remember the beds looking so well.'

'Please let me take them, Mr. Orme,' said Jean; 'I wish to, this morning.'

He darted a half-reproachful, half-angry look towards her. 'Was it so easy then?'

But as his eyes dwelt for a moment upon the white face and he noted the heavy dark-rimmed eyes, and the poor quivering lips vainly striving to shape themselves into a smile, he understood, though the knowledge did but increase his misery and self-condemnation. Bowing his head he silently went out by the window, which opened to the ground, to do her bidding.

Jean waited in fear and trembling, seized with a sudden terror lest Miss Orme should leave her before his return. In a hurried, nervous way she rushed into talk with the little lady *à propos* of anything, and contrived to keep her employed in replying until Nugent Orme re-entered the room. She dared not venture again to look at him; but presently a few geranium blossoms and roses,

loosely bound together, were put down on to the table before her, and, after a moment or two, a single white moss-rose bud was laid by their side. She took up the bouquet, and, after a short pause, the single flower, the colour rushing into her cheeks.

In the fulness of her happiness (was she not to see him to-day ?), Maude was a little critical over her flowers.

‘Nugent certainly does not improve in the art of arranging flowers!’ she laughingly ejaculated. ‘The idea of geraniums and roses—red and pink—without a bit of contrast in the way of white or green. Ah, that’s just what I want!’ her eyes lighting upon the young girl’s flower. ‘Give me your white bud, Jean?’

‘It’s my only one,’ pleaded Jean, hastily covering it with her hand. ‘Let me keep it—please, Maude?’ with a little half-sob.

‘Pray do not be sentimental about such a trifle,’ loftily replied Maude. ‘And do not be afraid; I am not going to take it from you by force. Bring me a spray of that fern.’

Jean brought it to her, and then stood watching her with eager eyes, her hand pressed over her beating heart. Ah, if, after all, Maude should not care for him! But the faint hope soon died, as she noted how tenderly two or three blossoms were

detached from the rest, arranged with a tiny piece of fern, lifted to the smiling lips, and then pinned in her dress. Maude had decided that nothing should prevent her going down to the drawing-room that day, and 'dear Nugent' was, as she playfully informed him in her note, to have the honour to be present at the ceremony, and assist with his arm, if need were. Had he loved her, how highly would the privilege have been estimated. No prisoner could have dreaded the rack more than did Nugent Orme dread meeting Maude. Once, as he restlessly paced the library awaiting the summons, a hope sprang up within him that a change might possibly have taken place in her sentiments towards him. But the hope was dangerously exhilarating; one wild outburst of joy at the bare thought of being free showed him the danger of indulging in it. He dared not allow his thoughts to wander to her—noble, simple, beautiful Jean, who had given him a religion, in return for which he had cast a shadow upon her young life. He dared not even try to minister to the soul he had wounded almost unto death.

'Now, Nugent, dear; I hope you have not been very impatient, but we thought it best to wait until Dr. Travers had been,' said Miss Orme, peeping smilingly into the room. He followed her upstairs to the door of the room, on the threshold

of which stood Maude, looking the personification of happiness. One glance at her radiant face showed him that he had nothing to hope.

‘At last!’ she ejaculated, placing her hand in his, and looking up into his face, half courting a warmer greeting.

‘I am very glad to see you looking so like yourself again,’ he said stupidly, releasing her hand after only the slightest pressure, and offering his arm.

A slight shade of disappointment crossed her face. He was so very grave and quiet. But she had made up her mind not to encourage doubt, and was not going to break faith with herself in the outset. She soon found an agreeable way of accounting for his silence. Dear Nugent, he was thinking what a long imprisonment it had been for her. ‘It has been rather a tedious affair, has it not?’ she murmured, leaning a little more heavily than was absolutely necessary upon his arm.

‘Very. I hardly expected to see you looking so—blooming.’

She smiled. ‘Dear Nugent, he had never been very happy in making compliments, and he knew how little she cared to receive them.’ Yet, she was conscious that she could have borne a little more in that way to-day—just this once. As they slowly made their way down towards the drawing-room,

Maude Poynder shot one or two anxious enquiring looks into her lover's face. How very silent he was! But she once more reminded herself that dear Nugent objected to much demonstration, and knew she did also. Presently—when they were alone together.

But when Miss Orme left them, which she very considerably did as soon as possible, after arranging some pillows on the couch and seeing Maude comfortably placed for a rest after the exertion, the latter did not find her companion grow more lover-like; indeed, he seemed quite at a loss for words. After a few awkward sentences, his eyes avoiding hers, and searching for something to talk about, lighted upon a book she had been reading, and he hastily availed himself of the topic it suggested.

‘Are you interested in this?’ he asked, taking up the book and turning over a few pages. ‘Close reasoning, is it not?’

But she was not inclined to enter into a discussion of that kind after a separation of six weeks, and only replied to his attempts to draw her into one with monosyllables. The more he strove, eagerly catching at anything that suggested itself apart from personal talk, the more reticent became she—wounded and indignant that the one topic of all-absorbing interest to her should be passed over. Yet he did not appear to have taken any offence,

or to be angry about anything. He was gentle almost to tenderness in his tone and bearing towards her (for indeed Nugent Orme was even more sorry for her than for himself), and yet both jarred upon her more than would have done positive anger.

How more than welcome to him was Mrs. Poynder's entrance, which gave him an opportunity to make his escape, and how eagerly he availed himself of it! With a murmured excuse about having letters to write, he left the mother and daughter together, and went to the library. Once there, he threw himself into a chair, and sat staring blankly at the picture of his future life as it presented itself to him, breaking into a short, bitter laugh at the recollection that it had once seemed all-sufficient for his need.

CHAPTER XV.

LOUIS POYNDER'S FAILURE.

MAUDE lay back amongst the cushions, rather paler than even her long confinement to the house seemed to warrant, her white brows a little puckered as she irritably replied to her mother's affectionate enquiries.

'Don't worry so, mamma! Pale, indeed! Did you expect to see me very red?'

'No, dear; oh, no!' Then the anxious mother went on: 'I am afraid—I hope I did not come in at an inopportune moment, Maude?'

'How about uncle's letter?' ignoring her mother's questioning looks. 'What does he say now?'

Mrs. Poynder had not a very cheerful account to give. Her brother had repeated his previous assertion respecting the disposal of his property in a very decided and businesslike manner indeed. He was on the eve of sailing for England, and previously intended making his will, leaving everything to Jean. 'Less three hundred a year for

myself as long as I live, dear. And he speaks of it as being a very large fortune !'

'You must be quite proud of having so generous a brother. Did you tell Louis what I advised you to tell him ?'

'Yes, dear, and he begins himself to see the necessity for making things sure as soon as possible. He promised not to delay any longer, as I told him your uncle might be here in another week or two if he sailed when he intended to sail.'

'We must get her a little finery, mamma. He may not approve of his heiress wearing those holland dresses, perhaps. At any rate, he will give us credit for good intention if she is well dressed. I wish I knew why he did not allow her to take his name, or acknowledge her all those years,' musingly went on Maude. 'It is evident enough that she herself has not the least suspicion what the cause of his long neglect of her was ; but there must have been a cause, and a very grave one. You have not told me your news, Jean,' she presently said, when her cousin came hesitatingly into the room, dreading to enter yet afraid to absent herself.

'News ?' shrinking back, with frightened eyes.

'Your letter, foolish child ! Mamma tells me that Uncle Oliver is on his way home. Indeed, I suppose we may expect him almost any day now.'

‘Yes;’ nervously twisting the ribbon of her hat, which was swinging from her arm in Jean fashion.

‘Quite a long letter, I suppose?’

‘N—o; not very.’

‘For private reading only?’ asked Maude, a little surprised at Jean not at once giving her the letter to read, as she had always hitherto done.

‘Oh, no, there is nothing private,’ said Jean, with a little guilty blush, taking the letter from the bosom of her dress and offering it to Maude. ‘Will you read it?’

‘Oh, yes, if you wish it,’ returned Maude, laughingly, extending her hand; in truth, a little curious to see whether there was any real cause for the girl’s hesitation. ‘You have dropped something, Jean.’

Jean hastily picked up the withered rose, and replaced it in its hiding-place.

‘Really, Uncle Oliver seems very much afraid of your losing your heart, Miss Jean!’ presently ejaculated Maude. ‘But it’s a little too late for advice, is it not? Nonsense, child! there is nothing to be ashamed of.’ Then, as with a little sob Jean hurried from the room, she added, ‘What a baby she is! However, that sort of thing will just suit Louis. He will like all the world to see how much he is adored.’

The luncheon party was a very dull one ; each was making an effort to be specially agreeable, and each was conscious of the effort in the others. It was the same at dinner ; only a little more dreary from lasting longer. Altogether Maude was forced to acknowledge to herself, when once more alone in her room, that the day had not been so satisfactory as she had anticipated it being. But she resolutely put from her all doubt and uneasiness, promising herself a brighter morrow. Of course, it was all certain enough : what was there to prevent it ? She had been a little too *exigente* in her expectations, that was all. But the morrow brought no change for the better. A heavy cloud seemed to be settling down upon them, appearing all the more dark and threatening to such of them as could not trace its cause. How glad would have been three out of the party to satisfy themselves in Miss Orme's easy fashion. The depression, or whatever it was, had communicated itself to her, and she attributed it, as she attributed most uncomfortable things, to the weather. But her prediction that a storm must be at hand did not comfort the others as it comforted herself. The little lady had no experience of other than atmospheric disturbances.

It appeared quite a relief to them all when Mrs. Poynder and her son came in whilst they

were at dessert. Unconsciously, they had sat longer than usual, in their endeavours to keep up appearances with each other. Whatever others might feel, there was no depression about Louis Poynder, and he did them all good service with his lively sallies. He had arrived at the conclusion that his cousin Jean was not altogether so ineligible herself, and with a large fortune extremely eligible; so he had come prepared to sign and seal that evening, and set the child's mind at rest. 'Poor little girl, I do believe she is beginning to fret!' he thought, taking note of her spiritless attempts to appear as usual.

He was, therefore, as willing to join the ladies as Nugent Orme desired him to be, after they had passed half-an-hour almost silently over their wine, making a jesting allusion to his having got to go through a bit of sentiment presently, out there under the trees.

Nugent Orme made no reply, accompanying the other to the drawing-room with lagging steps and downcast eyes. Miss Orme, Mrs. Poynder, and Maude were resting—the two former really, and the latter trying to appear to do so—in after-dinner fashion. Jean, restless, nerveless, miserable Jean (finding her burden so much harder to bear than it had been in the first excitement of accepting it, and blaming herself for finding it so difficult

to do right), had made her escape, and was wandering under the trees, unconscious that her movements could be traced by the gleam of her white dress.

She had even spared him the trouble of asking her to go out! thought Louis, caressing his moustache as he languidly made his way across the room towards the open window, stopping to examine the Swiss carving of a paper-knife and turn over a few leaves of a book on his way.

Nugent Orme, called to Maude's side by the couch, and playfully complimented upon not giving way to after-dinner habits, stood watching Louis with envious, miserable eyes. Had he been free to go to her!

'Well, Jean, is this romantic enough for you?'

'Louis!' she exclaimed, turning nervously towards him. 'Is it tea-time?'

'No, I should think not—for another hour. Here, where are you going? Don't be rushing away, child!'

'I—am tired. I want to go in.'

'Nonsense! Why are you so shy with me lately—eh, Jean?' catching her hands in his own, and laughing at her efforts to free them. 'Shall I guess why?'

'There is nothing to guess, Louis. Pray let me go!' Then she recollected what Nugent

Orme told her about people fancying that she loved her cousin. *He* must not think so; there must be no further miserable complications. She turned towards him, and said quietly and gravely:

‘I am getting older now, you know, Louis, and ought not to be so foolish as I used to be. People might think I cared for you in a different way.’

‘A different way to what?’ he added, laughingly. ‘Don’t try to flirt, Jean, it does not suit your style.’

‘Leave go of my hand, if you please, Louis.’

He laughed a little louder, and putting his disengaged arm round her, stooped and lightly kissed her brow.

She burst from his detaining arms, sweeping her hand across her brow with an angry gesture, as though to efface any trace of the contact of his lips.

‘How dare you! I—I thought you liked me, Louis.’

‘So I do.’

‘No, no, no! Not even as a cousin!’

‘What do you mean by not even as a cousin?’

‘It was not like a gentleman to behave in that way.’

‘What a child you are! Nonsense, Jean;

why what's come to you?' he said, getting a little out of patience, as he noted how distant she kept from him. 'Where's the harm of a kiss between two who love each other?'

'But we do not love each other, any more than as cousins.' At last she comprehended how very slight the kind of love which has only a cousinly relationship to sustain it may be.

He darted an angry look at her. What had come to the girl? But he remembered the stakes, managed to keep down the angry words which rose to his lips, and changed his tactics; putting on a depressed injured air. 'Come, Jean; be a little reasonable, darling. I know you do not mean to be unkind, and it would be deucedly unkind to flirt and pretend to turn the cold shoulder upon me now; after leading me on so long. I love you, and have always believed you returned my love—everybody believed it.'

Was it true? Had she unknowingly done him so much wrong? Had he and others misunderstood her so much as to think she cared for him? She fastened her grave eyes upon his, which shifted and fell beneath her gaze, and with a little sigh of relief returned:

'If people thought so, they were very foolish as well as wrong; *you*' (there was a slight emphasis upon the last word) 'know they were wrong,

Louis. I have never loved you, and you have never loved me, in any other way than as a cousin.'

'If you mean to play me false, do not think to fall back upon that as an excuse!' he exclaimed, roughly. 'I say I love you, and you have given me every reason to believe that you returned my love.'

Once more her eyes searched his. 'Then I know you better than you know yourself, Louis. You do not care for me, in the way that lovers care' (ah, did she not know what real love was too well to be deceived by this weak imitation?) 'and I am very glad, for it is the same with me.'

'I say you have led me on, and I love you,' he repeated, doggedly.

'No,' firmly.

It was his turn to cast an enquiring look at her. Had some hint about little Jessie reached her? 'You are keeping something back—what is it?'

'Keeping back!' she echoed, shrinking further away; the tell-tale colour flaming in her cheeks.

'Yes; I see you are. But if you have been told anything about—about my having flirted a little with another, you ought not to condemn me without giving me an opportunity to explain. A man may have a passing jest with a pretty girl now and then, without being untrue to the one

he loves. It would have been different if our engagement had been settled, and I daresay it's been terribly exaggerated to you.'

'Oh, no ; I assure you !' she replied, greatly relieved. 'I have not heard anything. I know no one who would say a word against you, if I would listen !'

Something else was beginning to dawn upon him. Whilst he had slept at his post another had crept into the fortress, and secured the position. It was bad enough to find her indifferent to himself ; but a thousand times worse to suspect that she loved another.

'You have been playing a double game !' he ejaculated, almost beside himself with rage and mortification. 'But you shall never marry another. I swear it !'

'You need not. I shall never marry.' And without another word she darted away, and was out of sight before he could prevent her.

He stood anathematising his wretched fate which made this girl's money necessary to him ; anathematising her, himself, the bole of the tree he stumbled against, the dewy grass, the silver moonlight, and every other thing that came within his range, and then turned sullenly towards the house again.

'Get your bonnet on, if I'm to see you home,'

was his speech to his mother, as he re-entered by the drawing-room window.

‘My dear Louis! What——?’ Mrs. Poynder looked up into his face, and left the rest unfinished; rising meekly to obey him.

‘Not without tea,’ protested Miss Orme in much astonishment. ‘I could not let you go yet, really. My dear Louis, there is no necessity to hurry your mother away like this.’

‘I don’t want her to come if she prefers staying, Miss Orme; but I’m due in the town at nine,’ he said, feeling that his *brusquerie* needed some sort of apology. ‘So I shall be glad if you will send some one with my mother.’

‘Of course, my dear Louis, of course,’ said the little lady.

‘Oh, no;’ hurriedly put in Mrs. Poynder. ‘If you will excuse me, I will put on my bonnet at once, Jemima.’ And, notwithstanding Miss Orme’s protestations, she went out of the room. What in the world had happened to make dear Louis look like that!

‘Louis,’ said Maude, taking a note from her pocket and beckoning her brother towards her, ‘will you leave this order at the bookseller’s for me? Then, as he came to her side, ‘What is it?’ she whispered, ‘Anything wrong?’

‘Everything’s wrong.’

‘She has not refused you!’ she ejaculated, sinking back amongst her pillows, and looking at him in dismay. ‘Oh, Louis, is it possible?’ Then she bent eagerly forward again, and whispered; ‘You have made some stupid mistake—didn’t seem earnest enough, or perhaps took her love too much for granted. A romantic girl like Jean expects lots of courting nonsense, you know.’

‘She won’t get any more than she has had from me!’ he replied, roughly. Even to his sister, he did not choose to allow that his courting would be unacceptable. For the moment he was even more angry at the idea of Jean not loving him than at the loss of the money. To be refused by a chit like that—refused! When any other girl—little Jessie for instance—was ready to fall down and worship him. Confound her if she supposed he was going to break his heart about her—he would soon let her see!

When Mrs. Poynder came down shawled and bonneted for the drive home she was unceremoniously hurried off without being allowed much time for leave-takings.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE WOOING O'T.

‘I AM afraid there has been some little tiff between Jean and Louis,’ said Miss Orme, when he had carried off his mother, and she was alone with Maude. It was the same as being alone; Nugent Orme having taken his book towards one of the windows to use up the fast fading light, and appearing completely absorbed in the subject treated upon.

‘Jean is always a little uncertain in her moods,’ sweetly replied Maude, turning her eyes upon Nugent’s downcast face, wishing she could read his thoughts, almost sure that they were not at that moment with the author he was reading. But had his mental ejaculation, ‘Blind, blind, blind!’ been uttered aloud, would she have perceived its application?

‘But it is very wrong to play with dear Louis’ feelings, my dear.’

‘It is very wrong to play with *anyone’s* feel-

ings, dear Miss Orme.' Then, seeing that Nugent Orme's attention was now openly given to what was said, poor Maude played her last card. 'Things may perhaps go on a little more smoothly when I return to Fernside. I was telling mamma just now that it was quite time for me to relieve you of——'

'My *dear* Maude!' began the little lady, quite distressed.

'No; I ought not to have said that, dear; I well know that it costs you no effort to do a kindness. Nor do I mean to try to thank you for all your goodness to me in words. Such a dear good friend should be thanked in kind, and I will try to repay your love with love. But I think they are wanting me at home just now, and I should like to be there when Uncle Oliver returns, which he may do any day now; so I must try to make up my mind to say good-bye to the dear old Grange. Fortunately we are not very far from you at Fernside.'

'Well, my dear, I suppose I must not urge your stay too much. But I shall miss you dreadfully.' With a glance towards her nephew, she added affectionately, 'But I hope it will not be for long.' Then with a confidential little nod, she discovered that she required some fresh wool for her knitting and trotted off to seek it; consulting

her watch, and allowing the half hour preceding tea for her errand.

‘Nugent, have I offended you in any way?’

It had come! He placed the book which he held on a table by his side, but he did not, as she hoped and expected he would, move towards her. Moreover, she could see that his face grew greyer than the pale, fast fading light seemed to warrant; whilst something very like a spasm of pain contracted his brow. Then he spoke in a low, grave, kindly voice: ‘I do not think you could offend me if you were to try, Maude!’

‘Then why—oh, Nugent, what has come between us?’ she said, rising and going towards him. ‘What has made you so different of late? Cannot you see how miserable it makes me to find you so changed—are you really changed?’

She found her answer in his face, and shrank back with an involuntary cry of pain. What would he not have given to spare her—had he not tried hard to do so? His heart bled for her, but he knew now how hopeless it was to try to deceive her. It was absolutely impossible to assume the bearing of a lover to another, after that interview with Jean. Possibly in time he might be able to put on some semblance of the real thing; but not yet—not now—with Jean’s first and last kiss fresh upon his soul. Perhaps

the best proof of the quality of his love for Jean was his deep pity for the other, and his anxiety to spare her as much as possible.

‘I cannot defend myself, Maude.’

‘Have you deceived me—is it possible that you have been all these years trying to win my love without feeling any towards me? Oh, Nugent, I *cannot* believe it—you cannot be so—so——.’

‘No, I am not so bad as that, Maude. I loved you’ (how terribly her heart sank at the past tense), ‘and I know that if my love was returned you have every right to consider yourself my affianced wife. And yet—I have been untrue to you.’ Even as he uttered the words the corollary ‘in being true to the truth,’ ran through his thoughts. Sorry as he was for her, it would never be possible to allow that his love for Jean was less than a love for all that was best and truest. He had not even realised the full meaning of the words before he knew her, and she had brought to the surface a chivalry and romance that had before been only latent in his nature.

‘You love someone else!’ faltered Maude, ‘and are seeking an excuse for acting dishonourably to me.’

‘I tried—I hoped, to prevent your seeing that there was any difference. But had I been

successful it would have been acting unjustly towards you. You have a right to know the truth and at the same time know that I desire to act honourably—so far as I can do that now.'

'Only honourably!' she murmured. 'Oh, Nugent, what a word from you to me!'

'God knows it, I would spare you if I could, Maude. I know you have just cause for indignation, and you cannot blame me more than I blame myself—on your account. But,' he went on, taking her hand, and with one last effort bidding good-bye to hope (he saw she was content to take the little he had to offer), 'you know what meaning I attach to the word, and if you will accept it I will devote my life to your happiness—so far as in me lies, I will make you happy.'

Her happiness—no word of his own. Where was her pride—where her vaunted strength and self-respect to accept such love-making as this? Wondering at herself she stooped and kissed his hand, accepting the sacrifice. She saw with terrible distinctness that it was a sacrifice, and one that she was incapable of making herself, and yet she accepted it.

He could not prevent his thoughts reverting a moment to that other love scene; when Jean, knowing herself beloved—knowing she held both

his and her own future in her hands—feeling no shame of her love, even proudly acknowledging it, had, without one moment's hesitation, chosen the narrow road. But he wrenched himself away from the remembrance, and sealed his compact with one kiss upon the cheek suggestively presented to him.

‘And now let us bury the subject of being untrue, and all that sort of thing, for ever between us, Nugent. I mean to forget it altogether, as only some passing fancy—some infatuation which could only momentarily place a barrier between us. I cannot believe that another could make you really cease to care for me.’ For her suspicions were still wide enough from the truth. She had put a certain construction upon his self-condemnation, and Maude Poynder was too well aware of the temptations besetting rich single men to judge him very harshly for having awhile succumbed to them. Arbitrating upon certain disgraceful episodes in her brother's career would have a little blunted her feelings in such matters had they ever been of the finest. Poor Nugent had evidently become entangled with some one like that dreadful girl who had given them so much trouble with her threats about Louis. Then Nugent was so different to Louis. Dear Nugent, he was such

a hard judge of himself, and would not be satisfied with making it a money question.

He was looking down at her with a grave smile. Well, it was better perhaps that she should believe it had been only some passing fancy, since she was going to marry him. And he was glad to think how little would satisfy her in the way of love-making, although it caused him once more to break down as he reflected how much more *exigente* Jean would have been. But he mastered himself, and turned towards Maude again.

‘Then it is settled between us, Maude?’

‘She smiled up into his face, and replied lightly, ‘And I mean to be very good, Nugent. I will not ask one question about the woman who has done me so much wrong.’

‘Wrong!’ he exclaimed, looking at her with astonished eyes, far enough from understanding the conclusion she had drawn, and with a vivid remembrance that Jean’s first thought had been justice to her cousin.

‘Well, she may not have had any personal ill-will; but she nevertheless did me wrong when she made you truant to your better self. I am not afraid of entering the lists against a bad woman, Nugent.’

‘Bad!’ he echoed, ‘bad!’ But he recollected that she did not know of whom she was speaking,

and kept back the words that sprang to his lips. 'Do you think I could insult you, Maude? Do you believe that I could imagine myself in love with a bad woman?'

'No, no. We will say no more about it.' She had not meant to imply that he could *love* a bad woman. It had been an infatuation, of course.

He glanced at her in a moment's doubt. Should he be more explicit? No; for Jean's sake it was as well to let her rest in the error she had fallen into. That she could fall into it not a little astonished him. He knew now what it was she believed, and her easy way of accepting such an explanation of the change which had taken place in his bearing towards her was a revelation to him. Simply replying that she was right in her decision to say no more about the subject, he nerved himself to the task, and went on with something else which he felt was expected, and must be said.

'How long does it take a lady to prepare for a wedding, Maude? You know I always have to depend upon you about the proprieties,' he said, with a little attempt at a jest. 'You will have to coach me up to the standard of respectability in matters matrimonial.' Then he watched eagerly for her reply.

Pleased at what she imagined to be a little more lover-like than anything he had yet said,

and far enough from guessing the cause, she said, with a soft, happy little laugh, 'I shall not ask you to wait longer than three months after the engagement is made known, sir.'

Three months! So soon as that! But he presently replied in a low voice, 'Then I must ask you to give me leave of absence for a couple of months or so, Maude. I suppose you will be taken possession of by the milliners and people, and—I am afraid—I think I require a little change—of scene.'

'Two months!' she ejaculated. 'Change of scene!'

'Will you trust me, Maude?'

Maude Poynder was the sensible woman she considered herself to be, certainly upon some points. In the first place she knew that his word was his bond, and in the next she was keen enough to see that this was not a time for stipulations; so she wisely made none. She laid her cheek against his shoulder, and with a tender upward look into his face, whispered, 'I will trust you entirely, Nugent.'

He kissed her brow, but she had again, so to speak, to suggest it to him by slightly raising her face to his. Presently she went on: 'Where do you think of going, Nugent?'

'My movements will, I dare say, be rather

erratic ; but I shall be able to give you some definite idea before I go.'

'And you will write frequently?'

'Oh, yes—yes, of course.'

How welcome to one of them was Miss Orme's entrance at that moment, considerately giving a little warning cough as she advanced into the room, and announced tea, 'if anyone there cared for so prosaic an entertainment.'

'Tell her, please,' whispered Maude, alive to the wisdom of the old proverb against delay.

He led her towards Miss Orme. 'Will you congratulate me, Aunt Jemima?'

'My dear boy, heartily! You know how long this has been the wish of my heart. Maude, dear, may you be as happy as you deserve to be.' Then she presently went on to hope that the marriage would not be long delayed. 'There is not the least necessity for delay, you know, my dears. Everybody has looked upon you as engaged for years. Three months! Now that is really sensible. Dear me, how busy we all shall be. If the Grange is to be redecorated and refurnished, as you always said it should be, no time must be lost, Nugent. Your hands will be quite as full as ours.'

'A few hours will suffice to explain my plans about the house to the builder, Aunt Jemima, and

the furnishing I shall leave entirely to Maude's taste, so that the library remains undisturbed.'

Miss Orme explained to Maude that it had always been understood between dear Nugent and her that she was to select what she chose from the dear old belongings to furnish her own suite of rooms. Maude agreed in the most delightful manner. As if it mattered to her what became of the old rubbish when she had a *carte blanche* to replace it with furniture after her own taste. The idea of the separate suite of rooms was especially agreeable to her.

'Tell one of the maids to let Miss Raymond know that tea is brought in, Robert,' said Miss Orme.

In a few minutes Jean entered the room, slowly and reluctantly, some traces of what the effort had cost her in her white face. It was some little relief to find that her aunt and Louis had taken their departure. He had been so terribly hard and bitter, and it had come upon her when she was still weak and unnerved.

Maude was rather surprised at her lover's sudden flow of speech after Jean's entrance. All sorts of things seemed suddenly to occur to him which ought to be told to his aunt. Little happenings in the village, a long talk he had had with Dr. Brayleigh about church dilapidations, his serious

doubts about the safety of the belfry, and so forth—all was reported circumstantially enough, even for Miss Orme, whose attention was effectually engaged. But he only succeeded in gaining a little time for Jean. He could not prevent his aunt from taking note of the evidence of suffering in the young face when at length she turned her eyes upon Jean.

‘My dear child? Why, what in the world!’ She remembered Louis’ abrupt departure, and her own suspicion at the moment that there must have been some love quarrel, and went on with a wise little nod. ‘If you would like to send a note to Fernside to-night, one of the men shall take it, my dear Jean. I think you would sleep all the better for having sent it, would you not?’

‘A note?’ said Jean, looking enquiringly up from a piece of work she was trying to appear occupied with. ‘No, thank you, Miss Orme; I have nothing to write about, and I dare say Aunt Maria will be here in the morning.’

Miss Orme gravely shook her head. A sad thing to be obstinate! The girl was so evidently punishing herself, too. ‘But suppose you might give someone else a better night, Jean?’

Jean made no reply, bending her face a little lower over her work. But something—she knew not what—in the girl touched Miss Orme’s heart,

and she went on cheerfully: 'Well, well, the longest night comes to an end, and you must not look so doleful, my dear, with a wedding so close at hand. Has Maude told you that she has consented to be Nugent's wife in three months?'

'No,' whispered Jean.

'Do you not congratulate us, my dear?'

The colour rushed into Jean's face, then faded almost as quickly, leaving her paler than before. But this once, she prayed—strength for this once, if she could only get through this, the rest would be easy.

'Well, Jean, can't you find one word?' said Maude, slipping her hand under Nugent Orme's arm, and turning smilingly towards her.

'Miss Raymond thinks congratulations are very absurd, and she is quite right,' said Nugent Orme, with a very decided movement, taking Maude's hand from his arm, and turning to leave the room.

'No, Mr. Orme, no; I do not think so,' exclaimed Jean, in a high-pained voice, rising from her seat, and going towards her cousin.

He paused on his way out; the sternness about his mouth and eyes giving way to another expression. Annoyed at his cavalier manner of removing her hand, and more than annoyed at his words, Maude remained proudly silent. Whilst

Jean stood with clasped hands and bowed head a few moments before her.

One guessed how those few moments were spent, whilst he stood apart powerless to help her. Then, out of patience, Maude said angrily, 'Pray do not be sentimental about it, Jean. I assure you I care quite as little about congratulations as Mr. Orme does.'

'But I want to say something, if I can only say it kind enough, cousin Maude. I—am glad you are going to be happy; please believe it,' her eyes beseeching *him* to believe her.

He flung aside the muslin curtain, to his aunt's consternation tearing it from beneath his feet with what sounded very much like a muttered oath, and strode from the window into the open air.

Fortunately Maude found a reason for it all very satisfactory to herself. Dear Nugent, he had always objected to Jean's schoolgirl demonstrations, and this was more than he had the patience to bear.

'Mr. Orme does not appreciate exhibitions of sentiment, you see, Jean,' she said, smilingly. Then, arranging a light shawl becomingly over her shoulders, she went out to join her lover in the peaceful moonlight.

'You are a little too severe upon poor Jean,

Nugent,' she said, when she came upon him chafing up and down under the trees; 'I think the poor child means well, though I do not admire her rhapsodical manner any more than you do yourself.'

He turned his dim eyes upon her. Would she feel it very much? Surely not a thousandth part of the suffering Jean was passing through! But then Jean was a thousand times more capable of bearing it. He knew now where the strength of each lay and in what it consisted.

Poor Maude found him very *distrain*, and unready to make the most of the occasion in lover-fashion. Not even being sorry for her could make him attempt to seem lover-like now. How different this to the delightful communing she had dreamt of between them. Ah! how she was beginning to hate the woman who had come between them, and caused all this difference—if by any chance they ever met—she as the wife, and the other as the cast-off!

After two or three failures in her attempts to draw him into something like conversation, she recollected how few were able like herself to meet him upon intellectual ground. Had he not frequently told her that he had never met a woman so well able to cope with a logical difficulty. So she led up to one of their favourite topics of con-

versation—a new school of philosophy just coming into notice. But even here, she failed to impress him now; and though he strove to prevent her seeing that she failed, she did see it. The doubts which had merely passed through his mind had remained in hers, finding more natural affinity there, and the scepticism which he had once shared with her, jarred upon him now. When she quoted an idea as ‘good enough for Dr. Brayleigh,’ going on to laugh at the old man’s credulous weakness, Nugent Orme gravely said:—

‘He’s such a good old fellow, Maude—an instance of the advantage of having a belief in *something*.’

‘The wrong thing?’

‘Well, I’m almost prepared to go that length. A mistaken belief may be better than none at all, though his cannot be called that.’

‘Have you been reading some credulous author lately?’ a little satirically.

‘No; I have gathered that much from the incredulous ones.’

‘And are going to number yourself amongst Dr. Brayleigh’s admirers?’

‘I have always been one of his admirers, you know.’

‘But you did not always admire his views.’

‘They might be a little broader.’

How different he seemed—how terribly changed from his old self! Worse than all, how ready he was to avail himself of her piqued request to return to the house.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE LAST STRAW.

THE next morning Maude began to remember her brother's affairs. She had seen deeper than he supposed, and knew that it was something more than a mere love quarrel between Jean and him. His vanity had evidently received a wound. If Jean was in love with him at all, she was not so much so as they had all imagined her to be. But it would never do to let the money slip through their fingers without making some effort to prevent it, and Maude considered herself quite able to cope with a girl like Jean. 'I must take the matter in hand for him,' she thought. 'He has not studied her character sufficiently, and I expect has taken things too much for granted.' Not the faintest suspicion of the truth crossed her mind. Her conviction that Nugent Orme had been drawn into some disgraceful connection, and that he still held his first opinion about Jean, effectually blinded her. Giving Miss Orme a hint to

leave them alone together, she commenced with a little graceful speech about being so sorry to see her 'dear Jean' looking so pale and out of spirits.

'You must try and do us more credit before Uncle Oliver returns, you know, Jean, or he will think all sorts of things—that we have not treated you well, and I don't know what. You were looking so bonny only a few days ago.'

Jean averted her face and murmured something about the heat. The other took note of her fluttering colour, and the heavy shade about the downcast eyes, then went on gently: 'Louis, too, is looking very dejected and unlike himself. If there has been any little tiff between you, you must allow a little, for his love's sake, Jean. He was evidently suffering very much last night. Love quarrels become serious when they are taken seriously. Louis is so earnest and sensitive, too. I never saw a more devoted lover.'

'Oh, do not call him that, Maude!'

'Nonsense, child! As if everyone had not seen. You can't make love without being called lovers, you know.'

'I never meant to make love to Louis, and I do not think he ever cared to make love to me—in that way, Maude. I'm very sorry people thought so.'

‘Come, Jean, be reasonable! If he has offended you—the best of good people make mistakes sometimes—I will help to scold him; but there need be no concealment between you and me. Of course I know you love Louis.’

‘No, Maude; no one can know that, for it is not true. I do not love him more than as a cousin, and I never shall!’

‘You cannot be in earnest, Jean. You would not be so cruel as to destroy his happiness for a whim.’

Jean turned her eyes calmly upon Maude, the sorrow in her face did not arise from any anxiety of that kind. ‘His happiness will not be destroyed. I am glad to know that Louis cares no more about me in that way than I do about him.’

Maude stared at the girl, facing her with such calm eyes, so self-possessed, quiet, and decided. Was it possible that this kind of material had been latent in the Jean of yesterday? Then she recollected certain signs and symptoms unmistakeable to woman’s eyes, and said with a cold, scrutinising look, ‘It is a question for your own conscience as to how much encouragement you have given to Louis, of course, Jean. But you certainly gave me the impression that your sentiments were warmer than cousinly towards him; there have

been all sorts of evidence of your being in love, as it is called.'

Here was the old Jean again. Shrinking as under a blow, a terrified guilty expression in her face, and with her hand pressed over her heart as though to keep her secret from escaping, she hurriedly said something about hearing her aunt's voice, and ran from the room.

'She does love him, and I shall get it out of her next time!' complacently thought Maude, as she prepared to descend to the drawing-room. She found her mother, Miss Orme, and Nugent gathered together near one of the windows in grave consultation; the expression of their eyes as they turned towards her told that the subject they were considering was a very solemn one.

'Oh, Maude!' ejaculated Mrs. Poynder, turning towards her with red-rimmed eyes.

'Something distressing I see, mamma. What has happened? Do not keep me in suspense—Louis.'

'No; your uncle.'

'Arrived—ill?'

'Dead!' hysterically replied Mrs. Poynder. 'The news arrived this morning.'

It had been only a few lines from her brother's solicitor just to convey the intelligence, giving a promise of further particulars by next mail; leaving

Mrs. Poynder and her son in the deepest anxiety to know what those particulars were. Had Oliver Raymond executed the will as he intended or not? Poor Mrs. Poynder was unpleasantly conscious that there was a great deal of anxiety respecting the disposal of his property, mixed up with the grief at the loss of her brother.

‘Be very careful how you tell her,’ said Nugent Orme, thinking only of her, upon whom this new blow would fall with such terrible force, utterly alone as she was and out of reach of such sympathy as they would have to give. ‘Be careful,’ he repeated in a low warning voice, as Jean at that moment entered the room.

Glancing towards them as she slowly advanced into the room, her eyes fell upon the letter in her aunt’s hand, then opened wide with hope as she sprang eagerly forward.

‘An Indian letter—news, Aunt Maria? Oh, tell me quick!’

‘My *dear* Jean.’

‘Isn’t he coming so soon—*what* is it, Aunt Maria?’

‘My dear child, try to—to be calm.’

‘Calm!’ echoed Jean, her eyes wandering nervously towards the letter again.

‘My dear child,’ again began Mrs. Poynder, with an appealing glance towards the others for

the help which they could not give, and seeking in her mind for words to convey the truth gently. 'Try to bear it with Christian——'

'Try to bear what?' exclaimed Jean, in a high-frightened tone. Then she went on pleadingly: 'I have borne a great deal lately, and I don't think I am strong enough to bear much more. But if papa is ill—if *that* is what I've got to bear, I must be brave, mustn't I? Papa *is* ill, is he not, Aunt Maria?'

Mrs. Poynder was silent, and with a last effort to ward off the blow, Jean went on, with a pathetic attempt at a smile: 'Do not be afraid of telling me; it was all nonsense about not being able to bear. I am a very strong girl, really, you know. Oh, tell me he is ill, somebody tell me he is only ill!' turning her eyes entreatingly upon their grave faces. Then with a little hopeless cry she lay at their feet, mercifully bereft for a time of the consciousness of her misery.

Putting their ready hands aside as if their touch were sacrilege, Nugent Orme knelt down and tenderly lifted her in his arms.

'Here, Nugent, on this couch.'

Gently he laid her where they bade him, and they summoned aid.

Nugent Orme stood looking down at the white face so terribly pathetic in its still despair. If he

heard the hints that his services could now be dispensed with they were quite unheeded. He watched them tending her with something of the same sensations which the bereaved experience at the sight of irreverent hands performing the last offices for their dead, impatiently, shrinkingly, enviously.

But when Maude opened a scrap of paper which fell from the girl's dress, as they loosened it at the throat, and with the words, 'Only a dead flower,' threw it aside, he lost all self-control. Roughly thrusting them aside he knelt down by the unconscious girl, took the passive hand and bowed his face upon it. It would have been all the same now had the room been crowded with gazers. In his awe of the terrible stillness which seemed to him so much like death and utter forgetfulness of everything but the misery of seeing her thus, he ejaculated, 'God help you, my darling!'

Miss Orme sank on to the nearest seat, with a cry of dismay. Maude caught her mother's hand, extended to touch his shoulder.

'He thinks it is you, dear; he must think it is you,' said Mrs. Poynder in a frightened undertone.

But Maude knew. The sudden hardening of her face, the cold, stony expression of the eyes, told that she knew; although she had the self-

command to keep her mother back and remain quiet. She even waved the servants aside. There must be no interruption now—the scene must be played out.

‘Jean ! Jean !’

Her eyelids fluttered, opened, closed, opened again, and the brown eyes dwelt upon his face, their terror softening into a loving smile. She was as yet only just able to grasp the fact that it was he and that he loved her. But presently her eyes shadowed again. Was this the blessed reality, or was it only a dream, and something else—something terrible—the reality ? The truant senses came struggling back to their work, and the light went out of her eyes again.

Nugent Orme stumbled to his feet, and went out of the room.

‘Oh, my dear Maude ! My poor ill-used Maude !’ ejaculated Miss Orme, wringing her hands.

Mrs. Poynder sank sobbing into a chair. ‘Such cruel, cruel treachery towards my poor child.’

‘One’s foes are to be of one’s own household, you know,’ coldly said Maude.

‘Shame !’ whispered the servants ; casting vindictive glances towards Jean. They had always looked upon Maude Poynder as their future mistress, and she was a great favourite with them.

Only that morning they had been informed by Miss Orme of the approaching marriage. With one exception, every woman present laid all the blame upon Jean. The master hadn't been to blame, of course. She was an artful, designing minx, and had led him aside by her treacherous ways. He was a great deal more to be pitied than blamed.

'But, perhaps, she couldn't help it; he might have fallen in love with her, without her knowing it,' ventured a pretty housemaid, who had herself suffered from having innocently occasioned complications between the kitchen-maid and her lover.

'Couldn't help it!' with scornful emphasis, to which poor Hester succumbed. Too much absorbed in her grief to hear, or if she had heard pay the slightest heed to their comments, Jean lay with closed eyes, white and still upon the couch as they had placed her.

Maude dismissed the servants, and then turned towards Miss Orme.

'You will let us have the carriage, and get away as quickly as possible, dear Miss Orme.'

'If you wish it, certainly, my dear Maude. Do whatever you think right and best,' replied the little lady, the tears streaming down her cheeks. 'I dare not beg you to remain, after receiving such—such dreadful treatment! I can only pray

that he may soon be brought to see his error, although I am sure *you* can see where the principal blame rests.'

'Yes.' Maude kissed the little lady's cheek; then went on to her mother: 'Mamma, ask her if she does not think that she ought to make some effort to leave here, unless she wishes us to go without her.'

'Yes, dear.' The anxious mother beckoned Maude towards one of the windows, and added entreatingly, 'It is very terrible for you, I know, my dear child, my heart bleeds for you, but—oh, Maude, do not offend her. What are we to do—what will become of us if your uncle has left everything to her?'

'Do not fear,' returned Maude, her eyes dwelling for a moment upon Jean's face with a smile, which almost caused her mother to utter an exclamation of affright.

And half-an-hour later the servants were deeply impressed by Maude Poynder's Christian forbearance, as she assisted them to place Jean comfortably in the carriage which was to convey them to Fernside.

'I couldn't never have done it!' ejaculated the kitchen-maid, clenching her hand and giving a very expressive look towards pretty Hester. 'I

don't profess to be such a Christian saint as that !'

Could she have been able to read Maude's thoughts as she reclined by her cousin's side in the barouche the kitchen-maid might have estimated her own capabilities rather higher.

CHAPTER XVIII.

WAITING.

ONCE in her own room at Fernside, Jean was left to bear her trouble as best she might. Whilst the disposal of her father's property, and her future position with regard to them remained in uncertainty, they wished to avoid committing themselves to any future line of conduct towards her ; had there been no graver cause for keeping apart from her. But Jean was only too glad to be left to herself, and was, in a numb sort of way, grateful to them for not disturbing her with condolences. Spared the knowledge of the revelation which had been made, she attributed their leaving her so much alone entirely to their kindness. To remain still and undisturbed in her own room at Fernside was all she now desired, and that was granted to her. She was only disturbed by the servants bringing her food, and an occasional visit from her aunt, who stood by her side in a dreary state of uncertainty as to what she ought to do.

In spite of herself, Maria Poynder's heart went tenderly out towards the orphan girl, whom she could not even now quite dislike, although she knew that her daughter's future life was probably embittered by her. Poor Mrs. Poynder, she meant to be loyal to her child, and yet she once or twice, as time went on, found herself giving utterance to a few kind words to the girl lying all day so still and hopeless-looking in a low chair by the window, her dim eyes seeing nothing of the scene they seemed to rest upon.

Once—only once—she ventured to plead a word with her daughter. But the sudden tightening of the beautiful mouth, and the hard glitter in the blue eyes, frightened Mrs. Poynder at her own daring.

‘I—I only meant that there is just a possibility she did not know, Maude dear. Of course if she knew he was growing attached to her, and gave him encouragement in any way, it was very, very wrong and cruel—and——’

‘That will do, mamma. I am not complaining in any way, am I?’

‘Oh, no, my dear, no; but it goes to my heart to see you look so.’

‘You have told Louis, of course.’

‘Well, dear; he wanted to know, and——’

‘You wanted to tell him.’

‘He was so surprised at the suddenness of our return, and he asked so many questions, and I thought you wouldn’t mind. It will be sure to get about through the servants, you know. So very unfortunate their being present, wasn’t it? Not that you need mind in one way. Every feeling heart will deeply sympathise with you.’

Maude set her teeth at the bare thought of the Raystone sympathy.

‘Dear Miss Orme, too, you will ever have a staunch friend in her. She feels how cruelly you have been wronged, and will take good care to do you the justice to inform every one of the exact truth. Will not you see her next time she comes, Maude dear? She was here twice yesterday, and you know how fond she is of you.’

‘I prefer being without her fondness. If she had not been as conceited as she is silly, she would have found out how much she bored me long ago.’

Poor Mrs. Poynder burst into tears. This was terrible—worse even than Louis’ reproaches, and they were hard enough to bear! But her heart ached for her child. Maude did not occupy herself in any way, and the terrible brooding stillness was worse to witness than the grief upstairs.

Cut adrift from all that her soul had anchored to, utterly alone as she was with her sorrow, Jean

was less to be pitied than her cousin, and the mother saw it.

‘I think it is very unfeeling and unjust of Nugent not to take any steps to set himself right with you, Maude,’ one day ventured Mrs. Poynder. ‘If only to ask your forgiveness, he ought to have come or written before now.’

‘Don’t worry. How do you know he has not written?’

‘Has he, dear?’ anxiously.

‘I’ve had a letter.’

A letter that had caused her to pace her room like a wild woman nearly the whole of one night, for it confirmed all her worst fears. He had ceased to love her, and all his self-reproaches and entreaties for forgiveness went for nothing now. He had ceased to love her! Worse than all, he had ventured to appeal to her womanly feeling on Jean’s account, and few and constrained as his words were, his anxiety showed terribly through them. He wrote to her as to a good woman—the Maude he had always had faith in—trusting her cousin to her kindness, and begging her to believe that neither in thought, word, nor deed had Jean been untrue to her.

She laughed aloud over the passage. ‘Kindness! Kindness to Jean!’ What did he take her for—one of the spaniel women, who love all the

better for being beaten? Ah, the misery of having to wait for that Indian letter, with the dread that when it came she might only find herself more powerless than she was now! To be perhaps obliged for the rest of her life to keep up some semblance of cousinly feeling. There was only one faint hope to live upon—the possibility of the will not having been executed, and some former one made before he took Jean into his favour still existing. She made no reply to Nugent Orme's letter. If he supposed he was going to escape so easily he would find himself very much mistaken. There was something yet to hold him by—his honour. Without news about either Maude or Jean, his aunt would tell him nothing, assuming an air of cold, dignified disapproval, though she was finding it more difficult every hour, and he dared not compromise either by asking questions elsewhere, Nugent Orme was passing his time as wretchedly as Maude could desire.

Half the short nights—as long as he could do so unobserved—were passed in watching the window of Jean's room. She sat there long hours, her eyes upturned to the stars, unconscious of his nearness, but the prayers offered up for her did not remain unanswered. Even he could see with keensightedness of love that, hopeless and cast down as she looked, her spirit had been only bent,

not broken, by the storm which had burst over her. Louis and he had met but once since the crisis, and the former's scowling looks and half-averted face had taught him what he might expect from that quarter. His faithlessness to Maude was not his worst offence in Louis Poynder's eyes; nor his love for Jean. It was the latter's love for Nugent which could not be got over.

Maude had meanwhile amused herself, if it might be called amusement, by exciting her brother's worst passions. Whilst taking none into her confidence respecting her own feelings, she rather enjoyed exposing her brother's selfishness and vanity, though he did not scruple to throw back all sorts of coarse taunts in reply. She was quite impervious to such arrows as he could aim. She did not mind his telling her that she was in the same boat, with rather worse chances for the future—couldn't he find lots of girls ready enough to jump at an offer from him—and so forth, when she laughed at him for fancying Jean was in love with him. His telling her that she had fancied the same thing with respect to Orme did not sting her as her words stung him. With her the sting was in the fact that the thing was possible, and not in anything he could say about it; whilst it enraged him almost beyond endurance to be taunted about having lost Jean and her fortune together. Mrs.

Poynder sat silently crying, afraid to utter a word.

The days dragged drearily on at the cottage—never was waiting more weary. Maude's one little distraction was ordering the mourning, the richest and most becoming to be had for money, with all the newest devices in the way of ornament. It was some little solace to know that black was not so unbecoming to her as to most people. If not selected with quite the same eye to the becoming, Jean's mourning was also expensive, and suitable for the daughter of a rich man. If she proved to be her father's heiress, as he had asserted she would be, they dared not offend her. 'I must wait,' Maude told herself again and again. The 'waiting' was not much less a trial to Louis and her mother.

Fortunately for herself, Jean was not present when the long-looked-for letter arrived. She had been accorded the privilege of doing as she pleased in the matter of joining them as she grew stronger, and had gladly availed herself of it, living almost entirely in her own room. The ten days' rest and quiet had restored her to a more healthy state, both physically and mentally. Little did she share or even suspect the others' excitement about the coming letter. He was dead, and the rest mattered nothing. She had not at any time given much

thought to the money part of the question, attributing almost all her advantages to her aunt's kindness, and forgetting the cheques as soon as they had passed through her hands. She had everything she required—more than she had ever dared to hope for when she was at Ivy Lodge—and she did not trouble herself to enquire the cost of it, so that her aunt was satisfied. Indeed, she had very indefinite ideas of the money value of things, never having been accustomed to spend. If she gave a passing thought to future arrangements it was to hope all would go on as before. After Maude was married she would try to be a daughter to dear Aunt Maria, and they would live peacefully on at Fernside. The picture seemed a little colourless at present, but it would be different when she had learned to be good—when she could hear his name without her cheeks burning and her heart throbbing as they did now.

Mother, son, and daughter quite astonished the servants by their suddenly-acquired habit of early rising, each making an effort to be in the breakfast-room by the time the morning post came in.

‘At last!’ All appearances were forgotten when their eyes one morning lighted upon the expected letter. With trembling fingers Mrs. Poynder snatched the letter from the wondering

maid's hand, in her haste scattering five or six others which accompanied it upon the carpet.

'No, do not wait—go away,' as the girl stooped to gather them up.

Maude took the letter from her mother's trembling fingers, which essayed in vain to open it. It was immediately snatched from her by Louis, who tore it open, and greedily devoured the contents.

'Hurrah!'

'What—oh, Louis, tell us!' exclaimed his mother.

'All right, it's mine!'

She sank on to a seat. 'Tell me, please, dears!' But neither gave a moment's thought to her. Her son stood gazing out of the window, with a triumphant smile upon his face, trying to realise the 'splendid luck,' and Maude was going slowly through the letter word by word, the colour deepening in her face as she read. Presently she said, with a quiet smile, addressing her brother:—

'It's mamma's first, you know.'

He laughed. 'All the same, isn't it, *mater*? It's worth something to be your son after all.'

'Has your uncle left his money to—us, then, dears?' asked the bewildered mother.

Lost in pleasant thought, her eyes dwelling

smilingly upon some mental picture, Maude heeded her not. But at length her son condescended to explain to her.

‘Yes, it’s all right for us. The old man made a will just before he died cutting us out as he promised, but it appears it must have been destroyed, and she can only take what we choose to give her. Then his marriage to her mother is supposed to have been all a myth. There is no evidence of it to be found, and there was always a mystery about the woman he took out with him twenty years ago, and she must have died long since. There is no doubt whatever about it, Jean is illegitimate, and we take all as nearest of kin. Won by a fluke!’

Mrs. Poynder uttered a sigh of relief. Never to be pressed for money again! ‘Is it much, Louis?’

‘Much! I should think so! Supposed to bring in nearly five thousand a year.’

At which poor Mrs. Poynder became hysterical. ‘She shall have everything heart could wish—she shall never know the want of money—shall she, dears? I will go this minute and tell her that——’

‘No!’ Maude laid her hand upon her mother’s arm, and added with a smile which the other shrank a little from, ‘I will tell her.’

‘Don’t quite kill her,’ laughed her brother, whom good fortune made a little generous to Jean. ‘Jove, Maude, I did not think you had so much of the vixen in you! What furies you women are to each other!’

‘You—will tell her gently, won’t you, Maude dear?’ pleaded Mrs. Poynder, as her daughter swept out of the room.

CHAPTER XIX.

HOW MAUDE BROKE THE NEWS.

WELL might Jean shrink back in her seat with a little cry of alarm, when, swift and silent, Maude entered the room, and locked the door behind her.

‘Is there anything the matter, Maude? Why do you look at me like that?’

Maude stood looking, only looking, at the girl who ‘had won his love from her—who had stepped between her and happiness.’ But it was enough to make Jean rise nervously from her seat and shrink farther away.

‘Are you angry with me?’ she faltered.

For a few moments Maude made no reply, her eyes still fixed upon Jean with that terrible look; then presently she asked in a low voice, ‘If some crawling thing had stung you, and you had got it under your heel, what should you do?’

‘Crush it, perhaps; but I should be very sorry to do it, Maude.’

‘I should not,’ and her eyes so unmistakably hungered to crush, that Jean cowered back again with a low cry. She saw now that her secret was known, and that she must expect no mercy.

Maude laughed aloud. ‘Why a viper could not look more afraid.’

‘I am not afraid, Maude, only sorry, very, very sorry, that you think me so bad as I see you do.’

‘Bad! is there any word bad enough for a girl who could treacherously take advantage of a friend’s absence to spread a net for her lover?’

‘I spread no net. I did not know—oh! Maude, do believe it, I did not know he was your lover, and I couldn’t help loving him until it was too late. When I let him see it, he told me at once that he was engaged to you.’

But it was not that Jean loved him; what would her love have mattered to Maude if he had not returned it? She could have watched the heart-breaking process calmly enough in Jean’s case. The never-to-be forgiven offence was that he loved *her*.

‘Do you think I will ever release him?’

‘He does not desire it, and he knows I do not.’

Maude chafed at her quiet hopeless tone. She had expected passionate weeping—all sorts of

rhapsodical lamentations; but what was there to triumph over here?

‘You will never persuade me that you did not know.’

‘But indeed, indeed, I did not!’

‘You will never persuade me.’

‘But I shall know it myself, and that will prevent my being as miserable as though I had wronged you intentionally, Maude. I shall not be entirely without comfort.’

‘You are thinking of your father’s promise to leave you his money?’

‘No.’

‘I say, yes. You are thinking of the power it will give you; all that you can do with five thousand a year?’

‘It would not buy what I care for most. It would not buy my father back for me, or it should be thankfully given.’

‘Very sentimental, but how if it is not yours to give after all—if you have neither father nor money?’ Fixing her eyes eagerly on the girl’s face, she went on: ‘What if the will was never signed? What if your mother was never married to my uncle, and you are illegitimate and left dependent upon our bounty for your bread?’

‘Not married!’ faintly echoed Jean, every vestige of colour dying out of her face.

‘At last! Yes: one of those women who——’

‘We are women, Maude.’

‘Do not bracket yourself with me.’

‘Is that all I’ve got to know?’ whispered Jean.

‘Is it not enough? Can there be anything worse than to be branded as one degraded amongst women?’

‘Yes, yes, yes!’

Maude stared at her, for the moment utterly dumbfounded, as she went on passionately: ‘It would be worse a thousand times to *be* degraded, and I am not.’

‘Maude caught her arm, roughly shaking it in her anger and mortification; she was all the more violent for beginning to feel ashamed of her own violence. She had not meant to go such lengths as this, but then she had imagined the victory would be more easy. She hated the girl all the more for making her lose her self-respect in this way. She must bring her to her knees now at any cost.

‘Have not you one spark of womanly feeling? Are you proud of being the child of shame?’

Oh, Maude, do you *like* to say such things to me?’ ejaculated Jean, the tears streaming down her cheeks, utterly unable to comprehend the other’s feeling. ‘I was so very sorry for you.’

‘How dare you tell me that? Sorry for me! You? whom everyone will scorn.’

‘I don’t feel a bit more deserving of scorn than I did yesterday, and it can’t make so very much difference or else people would have found it out and scorned me before.’ Then, remembering what Maude had had to bear, and allowing for what was perhaps a consequence of her disappointment, it almost looked as though it had affected her brain a little, she used to be so very different, she went on more gently: ‘Cousin Maude, do believe me. I am very, very sorry to have caused you any pain. I am more sorry for that than being scorned, ever so much, and I know you don’t really mean to be unkind to me.’

Maude looked moodily at her. If she could have felt that the girl was only a fool. How much better she could have borne any amount of anger than this!

‘What do you intend to do for a living?’ Not that Maude in her heart intended to drive the other to work for it. The mere cost of her food and clothes would matter nothing to them now, and she was not ungenerous with money.

‘Oh, do not think about that,’ cheerfully replied Jean, anxious to set her cousin’s mind at rest upon that point. ‘I should really prefer having work to do now; I should not have so

much time for thinking, you know, and I never minded work.'

At last beginning dimly to perceive what kind of armour it was that blunted her weapons, Maude moodily unlocked the door and went forth defeated. She saw now that in her haste to strike she had gone too far. It would never do to incur the scandal of turning Jean out of doors just after her father's death and their inheritance of the property; it would be making a martyr of her at once. Besides, it would be necessary to keep up appearances with the Ormes. In her heart of hearts she was not without some gleamings of hope that Nugent might be won back to his allegiance. She knew that however he might desire to be free, he would now hold himself bound until she chose to release him, and trusted to be able to win back his love if she could contrive to get him to come to Fernside, and be on something like the old friendly footing with them once more. He had loved her (she still tried to believe that, although those few words he had spoken to Jean were so terribly unlike any she had ever heard him utter to herself), and was deeply conscious of having wronged her—both advantages on her side, to begin with. And now, in her cooler moments, Maude reflected that it would be the height of folly to offend Miss

Orme; she could not afford to lose so very useful a partisan. So, when next the little lady presented herself at Fernside, her dear Maude found herself well enough to be seen, and gave her a very affectionate reception.

‘You may imagine what I have endured when it has prevented my seeing even such a dear old friend as you,’ said Maude, returning the little lady’s kisses. Hating the deception, yet sincerely believing that not she but circumstances were to blame for forcing her to use it. Would not she have preferred doing right? Had not she always preferred good to evil?

‘Don’t say a word, my love; I quite understand. I only wonder you are as well as you are after such cruel——’

‘You must not think I blame Nugent, dear Miss Orme; I can never believe that he meant to wrong me.’

‘How good and like yourself, dear Maude; how very good!’ ejaculated the little lady, very much comforted. It had been so terrible to believe that her boy was to blame. She could not think it, though she meant to be loyal to Maude, and it was a great relief to hear the latter absolve him. ‘I do not want to speak about her now she is in trouble, but we all know where the blame rests. The best of people err sometimes,

and my poor Nugent was too unsuspecting'—which was the utmost limit her blame could reach. 'I can only hope that she may be brought to see her error in its true light. Her father's death seemed quite a judgment—quite a judgment.'

Miss Orme returned to the Grange with just the impression she was intended to carry home. 'Dear Maude bore her trial so meekly, uttering not a word of complaint, and had been so thankful for her kind old friend's loving sympathy.' All was circumstantially repeated to her silent nephew, with the little additional speech so carefully taught by Maude.

'What the dear girl feels most is your avoidance of them ever since, Nugent. What have *they* done, you know? Not one word of blame have they uttered! Poor Maude expressly said she did not blame you. But she could not repress her tears when she said it seemed so hard to have lost your friendship as well as your love, when she had never uttered one word of reproach. If you would only look in at Fernside sometimes on your way past, you know, dear, it would not seem so marked.'

'I will call certainly—if they wish it; but I think it would be better taste to let things remain as they are—for the present,' he replied, a little

hesitatingly ; wondering that Maude should desire him to call.

‘ You have not any unkindly feeling towards poor Maude, dear Nugent ? ’ anxiously.

‘ No ; she knows it.’

‘ Then do not you like to go because you are—.’ Was he afraid of himself if he met that artful girl again ? Miss Orme had succeeded in convincing herself that Jean had, so to speak, bewitched him against his will, and believed that if she were kept out of his sight, he would very soon forget her and return to his first love. Perhaps dear Nugent was afraid of trusting himself in Jean’s vicinity again. ‘ I do not think you need be afraid of meeting anyone you do not wish to see, Nugent, I hear no one sees her ; she has sufficient decency to keep out of sight—and——.’ Her nephew’s eyes warned her to say no more ; but she flattered herself with the hope that she had not been entirely unsuccessful.

Nor had she. Surprised as he was at Maude inviting him (what was it but an invitation ?) to go to Fernside, at any rate so soon, he felt that he could not decline her invitation. The next day he made his appearance at the cottage, somewhat awkwardly enquiring for Mrs. Poynder, conscious that the maid-servant delayed her reply to study him with curious eyes, in full possession of the

story of his faithlessness, as indeed was everyone he met.

He was shown into the drawing-room, and a council was immediately called in the kitchen to discuss his probable state of mind—his looks, tone of voice, the issue of the visit, &c. &c.

The visit passed off more tolerably than he had anticipated. Carefully prepared by her daughter, Mrs. Poynder behaved admirably. She was as cordial as an old friend should be in her tone, with only just a *soupeçon* of dejection and lowering of the eyelids now and then; whilst Maude seemed most anxious to divest his mind of the idea that she desired in any way to recriminate upon him for the trouble that had come upon her. He was impressed with the belief that, as far as possible, she wished to spare him, and avoided giving any sign of her own suffering or appealing even indirectly to his sympathy. She could not, of course, prevent his seeing that she looked very pale and out of health; but she excused that by explaining that ‘dear Uncle Oliver’s death had come upon them so suddenly.’ Her generosity was fully appreciated, though it caused his tone to become lower and more regretful. He felt terribly guilty of having caused that other and evidently deeper suffering. She had known her uncle too slightly to mourn for him

to such an extent as to affect her health. His manifest self-condemnation was very satisfactory to Maude. But just as she was congratulating herself upon getting on so well, Jean's voice was heard in the hall as she entered from the garden. It was only a word or two addressed to one of the servants, as she passed the drawing-room door on her way to her own room ; but Maude was quite startled at the effect. He seemed for the moment completely unmanned, and for the rest of his stay remained disturbed and abstracted, finding the greatest difficulty in doing his part of the conversation. Maude mentally vowed vengeance upon Jean. But she presently told herself that she must be patient with him ; upon the whole, things had gone as smoothly as she could expect from a first visit. He had evidently done his best, and felt terribly conscious of having brought trouble upon her. Then she tried to believe that his disturbance at the sound of Jean's voice did not necessarily proceed from his love for her. She must, if possible, keep him to paying them an occasional visit. Her last words, as he rose to take leave, uttered in a timid, hesitating voice, 'May I beg the loan of the last Quarterly, Nugent? I am so desirous to see Müller's article, and the Raystone people are so long in getting things,' was a master-piece in its way.

Quite ashamed of having obliged her to ask for it, accustomed as she had always been to receive it, he replied hastily, 'Oh, yes; I will send it immediately; I hope you will excuse my having forgotten to do so before.' He was a little surprised, nevertheless, that she had any thought to give to such a matter at that moment. On his way home he puzzled a good deal over his reception, it had been so very friendly and cordial, so much more so than he had expected or had any right to expect. It almost looked as if—Was there any possibility that Maude had found out that her sentiments towards him had been after all no warmer than his were towards her, and she was going to be content with friendship? He was afraid to indulge the hope.

CHAPTER XX.

A BIT OF SUNSHINE.

THE time was passing drearily enough with Jean. With the elasticity of youth she had soon regained her mental and bodily health; but, from want of proper exercise, both were a little deteriorating again. She had had an intuitive knowledge of her own need when she told Maude that she would be all the better for having work to do. Her present life afforded too much time for thought whilst supplying no healthy food for it. She was almost always alone; it had come to be understood that she was not to make her appearance in the drawing-room when visitors were there, and Maude arranged that her exercise should be taken at a time when she was not likely to meet any of their acquaintances; although even that contingency would not be inimical to herself now that people were prepared to regard the girl as not belonging to their sphere—a nobody dependent upon the Poynders'

charity. Jean walked her couple of hours or so in the early morning, about as enjoyably as she had got through the recreative walks at Ivy Lodge. 'If only they would speak to me sometimes, and Maude would let me do something!' sighed Jean, envying the maid-servants as they laughed and chattered over their work in the kitchen.

Suddenly a bit of sunlight found its way into her life. Her aunt and cousins were out, and free to roam about the house as she pleased (no visitors would be admitted during their absence) she took her book into the drawing-room. She was poring over it, trying to imagine herself one of a merry touring party described, when the door was softly opened, and someone entered the room. She did not raise her eyes from her book, taking it for granted that it was one of the servants upon some errand. To her astonishment she suddenly found two arms put round her neck, and a hearty kiss pressed upon her cheek.

'Annie—Miss Lawrence!' she ejaculated, hardly knowing whether to laugh or cry in her astonishment. This was more like the Annie of old than the stiff young lady who barely accorded Jean a bow upon the two or three occasions they had happened to meet since that memorable day of the fête.

‘Annie, if you please, my dear. Pray don’t look so scared. I hope you are not sorry to see me?’

‘Oh, no, no! How could I be? Only I did not expect to see you, and I’ve been so—stupid lately.’

Annie nodded: ‘You see it was no use telling me that you couldn’t, wouldn’t, or shouldn’t, be seen. They might have known that was just the way to ensure my seeing you.’

‘How kind of you! Oh, Annie dear, did you really want to see me?’ eagerly asked Jean, with flushing cheeks.

Annie laughed. ‘If I’m to be absolutely sincere, I am not quite sure that I did, until somebody talked me into it. Well, give me a kiss, child; I promised not to say one word that might sound like a reproach, and I suppose I *must* like you a tiny little since I feel so awfully glad to see you again. Naughty heroines are all the rage, or else I shouldn’t, of course. Good gracious, how I do envy you!’

‘Envy me—me! Oh, Annie, you don’t know then!’

‘Oh, yes, I do. It’s all over the place, you know. A lover dying for you, when he ought to be dying for somebody else; somebody else ready to kill you, but trying to behave like an

amiable martyr. Nobody's child ; without fortune, friends, or anything else but lovers—all sorts of delicious complications. I should think I do envy you ! Poor I am obliged to do everything in the most humdrum manner, engaged in the tamest way to everybody's satisfaction. Arthur says he will run away with me if I like ; but where's the use, when everybody knows we can be married whenever we please ?'

' Arthur—Mr. Brayleigh ? '

' Yes ; it has come to that, dear ; I did once think I cared most for Louis, but it turned out to be Arthur. The worst is, he took me by surprise, and the moment he spoke found out that I cared for him ; so he wasn't even kept in suspense. He's such a dear, too, that I really can't quarrel with him. He helped me to make my way to you, but I promised the girl not to tell how, and we have so enjoyed outwitting Miss Maude. Do tell me, Jean ; isn't she more wild about it than she pretends to be ? I don't believe in her, and that's the truth ! I'm quite sure she's not quite so sweet about it, as she wants people to believe. I never did like martyrs ! Why even you can look daggers sometimes, and Edward says you are just the girl—Ah, that reminds me, I was to say all the kind things I could think of. He made me learn a most elaborate speech about

his deep respect, and regret, for your trouble, and all that. But the gist of it is that he is a dear good old fellow, and wants you to understand that if you need a friend there is one at the Elms ready made.'

'How good of him—how very, very good!'

'Don't be sentimental, there's a dear. His being good is not a cause for tears, you know. Besides, you look—what word was that, Arthur? Oh, hipped enough already.'

'Hipped?'

'Cut-up—worried, you know,' with a superior air.

'I could hardly be anything else, after——'

'Oh, no, no, of course not; you must not mind my way.' Then, to create a diversion, 'What do you think of this jacket, dear?'

'It's very—' utterly at a loss what to say, Jean added, 'Nice and warm, isn't it?'

'But the shape—what does it look like, child?'

'Isn't it—something like a—gentleman's short coat?' hesitatingly.

'Yes; ' delightedly replied Annie. 'Of course it is; I had it made by Edward's tailor. Daring, isn't it? And this cravat; do you notice? No one could take this for a lady's. I buy them at

the hosier's to make quite sure, and I won't have it called a tie because that's of no gender.'

Jean began to laugh. 'You really do look like a boy at the top of you, Annie!'

'All right!' replied Annie, contentedly. Presently she went on, eyeing the other a little curiously; 'I suppose you are engaged to Nugent Orme now, Jean?'

'No, oh, no, no!'

'Then that accounts for Miss Maude being so meek about it. But there can't be much chance for her, after his falling in love with you.'

'Mr. Orme wishes her to be his wife, Annie, and I think she will be.'

'The story is that he doesn't wish it.'

'I cannot think how such a thing got about.'

'Don't you know, Jean? In the simplest way in the world. It appears that when you heard of the bad news from India, you became insensible and he got frightened, and talked to you in the most loving way before all the servants, quite raved over you; their housemaid told our Emma, whilst Maude stood listening as white as a ghost.'

'How terrible for her!'

'Well it couldn't have been very pleasant. I shouldn't like to stand by whilst Arthur was making violent love to another girl certainly; but

it would make some difference if she did not want him, as I suppose you did not?' With a keen questioning glance into the girl's face.

Poor Jean. In spite of herself a burning flush mounted to her brow and her eyes fell.

'Ah!' ejaculated Annie. 'I do believe you are as good as somebody always said you were, and that you are going in for self-sacrifice and all that! I should think if he were here he would say that I might go on now;' she mused; studying Jean's face. 'He said I was not to let anything, not even her engagement to Nugent Orme, deter me.' She added aloud, 'I haven't told you yet what I came specially to say, Jean. I am going to stay at Eastbourne with Arthur's aunt for three months. Between ourselves, I think she's going to try to convert me from the error of my ways. She actually told me one day that she feared I had a tendency to fastness—as if it were desirable to be slow! Anyway, she has taken a house at Eastbourne and talked papa over about the good it will do me to have three months with her before my marriage, as I had never experienced the advantage of a mother's care and counsel. Mamma died whilst I was an infant, you know. Poor papa insists upon my going, and even Arthur dared to say it would do me good. I've been thinking that there's one

thing that would make it bearable, and only one, that is your coming with me?’

‘Oh, Annie, what a kind thought! How very good!’

‘Don’t admire the goodness too much, my dear; it may not have originated from myself, you know. But I shall be really thankful if you will come. Fancy how awful it would be to be imprisoned for three months with a stiff old woman who seems to have no other subject for conversation, but feminine propriety—propriety!’

‘I don’t know how to thank you, but——’

‘You won’t come?’

‘I cannot, Annie.’

‘You are afraid of Maude! It is no use denying it, for I know you are, but leave me to manage her. I will get her into such a corner that she will be forced to consent. My dear, I should quite enjoy it!’ said the laughing girl. ‘I should like to give her a pat for every little nasty speech she has made to me. Only say you will come and I’ll take care she shall let you. She *may* be a little glad to get you out of the way, you know. Say you will, Jean?’

But Jean shook her head. Grateful as she felt for their kindness, she saw that she ought not to enter into any closer relationship with the Lawrences. So, though Annie Lawrence used all

the arguments she could think of, she went away unsuccessful.

But she left Jean a great deal cheered by the visit. It brightened her wonderfully to know that the Lawrences, who seemed acquainted with so much of what had occurred, could still have such kindly feeling towards her. If they had even known the worst part she couldn't help believing they would have been pitiful.

CHAPTER XXI.

MRS. POYNDER'S DISCOVERY.

WHEN next Miss Orme ventured to allude to Jean in talking to her nephew it was as she had been tutored to do by Maude.

‘Who is Miss Bell?’ he asked, after hearing the name repeated two or three times.

‘Do not you know, Nugent?—Oh, no ; I ought to have remembered that they would not tell you anything against her (had not Maude said they would not?) in any way. Miss Raymond, as she was called, never had any right to the name it appears. So far as is known, her name is Bell.’

‘Bell?’

‘It turned out that Mr. Raymond was never married, Nugent. I always felt that there was something wrong about the girl, and, as dear Maude says, I very rarely err. Of course her mother would never have introduced such a person to her friends had she known what she does now. But dear Maude says they should not

think of making any difference in their treatment of her now, though they cannot oblige other people to associate with her. She shall always have a home there.'

All of which was to show him 'dear Maude's' generosity and largeness of spirit. But the reception of it was much too matter of course to please the little lady. She considered that Nugent ought to be a great deal more impressed with Maude's goodness and generosity towards her rival than he appeared to be. But his matter-of-course reception of the intelligence was, in fact, more really complimentary to her favourite than would have been the astonishment his aunt expected. If his respect for Maude's character had slightly diminished of late it was so slightly that he was hardly aware of it, and it did not enter his head that she could be other than kind to Jean. If not quite capable of the same kind of generosity towards Jean as the latter's towards her, he believed it was of the ordinary quality; sufficient to prevent any display of unkindly feeling. He little imagined what Jean was subjected to!

After that first visit of his there had been a sharp attack upon her by Maude.

'I supposed if you had not the right feeling you would have the decency to keep a little in the back ground without being told to do so. When

Mr. Orme is here again I beg you will not try to attract his attention by talking outside the door.'

'I did not know that I attracted his notice, Maude. I'm sure he would not think I wished to do so.'

'How can you tell what he thinks of you now he knows your wretched antecedents?'

'He does not think worse of me for knowing them.' Sadly enough, but so quietly and decidedly as to cause the colour to rise in Maude's cheeks.

'Why will not you let me go away, Maude?'

'Because I choose you to remain. You would like to set up for being a martyr, I dare say ; but you shall not have the opportunity. We cannot help people objecting to associate with you, and are, therefore, obliged to request you to keep out of the way when visitors come ; but everything that money can purchase you can have. You cannot say that anything is denied you, and you can be as comfortable as you choose to make yourself.'

Jean gave a long steady look at the picture of the future marked out for her, then turned from it with a little impatient gesture, and replied, 'I don't want to be a martyr, Maude. But I really should be one if I stayed here for the sake of food and clothes when I should much prefer working to earn them.'

Maude reflected a few moments before replying. Though it would never do for them to turn Jean out it would be very desirable indeed if she could be made to go of her own accord, and it could afterwards be shown that she had so gone. How much easier it would make matters—especially with regard to Nugent Orme—if Jean could be induced to take herself off. She replied with a smile—

‘All romantic girls talk in that way, I suppose; food and clothes, as you call them, appear such very prosaic things to you. But I do not think you would be quite so high-flown if you were put to the test and had to work for them. Anyway, you cannot pretend that there is any necessity for you to do so.’

From that time Jean found her life at Fernside anything but an easy one. She was subjected to all sorts of petty annoyances; and, although she could not realise that they were really intended to wound, she experienced all the discomfort she was intended to feel. The servants began to treat her with systematic rudeness and neglect, and if she asked for the most trifling service it was rendered as though under protest. She would gladly have waited upon herself, and fetched a jug of water, or what not, when she wanted it. But that she was not allowed to do. Cook ‘wasn’t going to have people peeping and prying about *her* kitchen.’ So

when she wanted water, and it was very rarely put in her room now, she was made to ring again and again, and had to submit to the housemaid's impertinence about the hardship of having to wait upon 'upstarts,' when at length the jug was thumped down just inside her room. Downstairs there was Louis Poynder's scarcely more refined rudeness to be borne. He was taking elaborate pains to prove to her how very little he cared for her, and the more unsuccessful were his endeavours to pique her the more persistent did he become. Once or twice he struck fire, and turning upon him with flaming cheeks and angry eyes she passionately struck back again, blow for blow. But she would come to him afterwards, asking forgiveness like a child.

'Oh, Louis, I am so sorry ; do forgive me ! I ought to have known that you could not mean to be unkind ! I am always having tempers lately and taking things wrong. Oh, yes, it is wrong and wicked to think you capable of really wishing to be unkind after all you have done for me !'

At which he would turn sullenly away with some muttered speech about her being a fool. 'The girl must be a fool !' he told himself so over and over again. 'What could it be but stupidity to believe in people to the extent she seemed to believe ?' Yet he was forced to acknowledge that

the stupidity foiled him. There was the difference between himself and his sister, that Maude would have given half she possessed to believe Jean stupid and could not. She had the keener pang of perceiving the truth whilst she fought against it.

Then, in spite of themselves, her carelessness about the money touched them. True, they ascribed it to her inexperience and ignorance of what money could buy; her want of taste for the beautiful, and so forth; but the fact remained that she was honestly glad they had come into her father's fortune. Mrs. Poynder was quite overwhelmed with gratitude towards her, and meant to give her substantial proof of it when things were a little more settled. At present dear Louis and Maude kept her so completely engaged. She did not suspect that her daughter had any other end than was apparent in keeping her so much occupied as to have no time to give to Jean. Maude was determined that the latter must be got rid of some way (it was no use taking any decided steps towards winning Nugent Orme back to his allegiance so long as the girl remained there), and contrived to keep her mother constantly occupied, and apart from Jean.

Now that the fortune was assured to them, all sorts of schemes were contemplated for the future;

Louis Poynder taking upon himself the management and settling of it all in the most matter-of-course way, taking his mother's acquiescence for granted. Her *rôle* in the programme was simply to sign cheques, he laughingly informed her. As soon as the necessary business of proving her heirship, &c., was gone through she found herself signing cheques at a rate which rendered it problematical whether five thousand a-year would suffice the needs of her children. But they told her that it was only the back debts pressing for payment all at once. When they were once settled things would run on smoothly enough. But, of course, Louis must now have his chambers in town, horses, servants, &c. 'The *mater* wouldn't expect him to live like a pauper now, and living like a gentleman would cost money. Say she put down a thousand for him to begin with, for horses, and furniture and things; he meant to furnish his room properly, of course.'

It was two months after the arrival of the last letter in which it was stated that a few of the late Mr. Raymond's personal effects (he had left nothing of much value in that way) had been despatched by the long passage. They had duly arrived, and been carefully looked over by Mrs. Poynder and her daughter, who had found nothing of importance. All was contained in one large chest, books,

an old-fashioned mahogany desk, in which were some packets of letters chiefly from Mrs. Poynder herself, bank vouchers, a few trinkets of small value, the dead man's watch and chain, &c., and a small trunk filled with woman's clothes; the fashion of which dated some sixteen or eighteen years back, and told nothing of the wearer. Maude and her mother minutely examined each and everything; searching carefully in every fold for any scrap of intelligence respecting the woman who had lived with Oliver Raymond. But they found that the lawyer had been right; there was not the slightest clue to the person who had worn the things other than the name 'M. Bell' upon some of the linen yellow with age. The quality of the clothes neither indicated luxury nor poverty, and showed no individuality whatever, in the way of make or ornament. The few things had been found as though left untouched for many years, and the lawyer had at first hesitated about sending them until he found there was nothing of sufficient importance to fill the chest, then put the small trunk in just as it was. It had doubtless belonged to the so-called wife, and might possibly tell something to feminine eyes.

All doubts set at rest, the Poynders entered joyfully into their possessions. They were even generous enough to give Jean her father's watch

and chain, and Mrs. Poynder suggested that she might like to have his desk.

‘Well, yes; I don’t mind. If she cares for anything so ugly,’ said Maude. Upon being offered, Jean expressed herself very thankful. It would be a thousand times more precious to her than the best desk to be bought for money.

‘We must examine it well first, you know,’ said Maude to her mother when they were alone again. ‘Those old-fashioned desks have secret compartments and false bottoms sometimes. Look it well over yourself, and then let me see it before you give it to her.’

A few hours later Maude was in her own room in pleasant contemplation upon the possibility of introducing a little violet or grey with the sombre black, when a maid-servant came running hastily to her with a message from Mrs. Poynder, begging her to come immediately to her room.

‘I am afraid mistress is taken ill, Miss Maude; she looked dreadfully pale, as if she had had a fright.’

Maude hastened to her mother’s room. Mrs. Poynder was sitting before the open desk drowned in tears; a large packet in her hand.

‘Oh, Maude, my *dear* child! oh, my poor children!’

‘What is it?’ ejaculated Maude; every vestige of colour dying out of her face, as her eyes fastened upon the parchment in her mother’s hand.

‘You have not found—not—not——?’

‘It is your uncle’s will;’ sobbed Mrs. Poynder. ‘Oh what shall we do? How can we pay her back now!’

Maude moved swiftly towards the door, locked it, returned to her mother’s side, and took the paper from her nerveless fingers.

Amid Mrs. Poynder’s sobs and sighs and ejaculations of distress, she gathered the contents of the will, which she saw was duly signed and sealed, all that was of moment to them. ‘The whole of my property, funded and otherwise, to my daughter Jean. Three hundred a year to my sister Maria, wife of the said James Poynder, during her life. Fifty pounds each to her son and daughter, Maude and Louis,’ &c., &c., read Maude, the letters dancing mockingly before her eyes.

‘Oh, it’s too dreadful, my poor dear children, my ——!’

‘Be still, mamma; cannot you be quiet? You will be heard all over the house!’

‘My poor children!—cruel, cruel!’

‘*Will* you be quiet?’ said Maude, in a low

voice. 'Cannot you see that it need not make any difference?'

'No difference!' echoed Mrs. Poynder, the tears streaming down her face, as she looked up into her daughter's eyes, a little ray of hope beginning to appear in her own. 'You mean she would be generous to us, dear? Yes, I ought to have thought of that, and it's good of you to remind me.' For in truth the poor mother had been more afraid of the effect of the revelation upon Maude than anything else.

'I do not intend to give her the opportunity to exercise her generosity,' coldly replied Maude; as she spoke, looking round the room for means to do what she wanted to do, and rapidly arguing out with her conscience the necessity of doing it. The act was forced upon her—it was simply defending her mother from a gross injustice, and the blame would lie with him who had made such an iniquitous will! Once the act was done her mother would be amenable to reason—never whilst the will was in existence.

'I do not understand,' said Mrs. Poynder, shrinking a little from her daughter's eyes, and grasping the will with a tighter hold.

Some one was tapping at the door. Maude lifted a finger to her lips, and gave a warning glance towards her mother; not a little astonishing

the latter by her suddenly recovered self-control as she said in her usual voice :

‘Who is there?’

‘If you please, ma’am, Mr. Orme is in the drawing-room.’

‘Say that Mrs. Poynder is not very well and I am attending her. Ask him to excuse me, Phœbe. No one else is there, I suppose?’

‘Only Miss Bell, ma’am.’

‘Only Miss Bell! only Jean! Wait, Phœbe.’ Maude stood hesitating between the two evils, glancing at her mother’s tear-stained face. ‘I think I will go down. Yes; say that I will come in a few moments.’ Then, as the maid went on her errand, Maude turned towards her mother again.

‘Give it to me, mamma.’

But Mrs. Poynder seemed suddenly to have become decided and unyielding. Though she spoke no word she clasped her two hands over the will, and held it pressed tightly to her heart.

‘You see I *must* go down, mamma, she is alone with him. Well, will you promise not to mention a word to anyone till I have seen you again?’ Then with a little laugh she saw she must try to disarm her mother’s suspicions, she added: ‘Don’t be afraid, mamma. I am not going to do anything dreadful. Put the will back into

its place, and try to remain silent about it until we have talked over the best method of telling her together.' Then, remembering that prevention is better than cure, she added, as she reached the door, 'Come down to the drawing-room immediately you have put it away, will you promise me that?'

'Yes, dear,' and Mrs. Poynder turned towards the desk to do her daughter's bidding.

Maude went swiftly on her way towards the drawing-room.

CHAPTER XXII.

GONE.

JEAN had ventured into the drawing-room in search of a book, and, happening to light upon a new Tennyson, stood dreaming over it longer than she was aware of. It was a greater trial than either had yet gone through, when Nugent Orme was suddenly ushered into the room. Had they been prepared, each was capable of keeping up appearances; but for the first few moments they could not utter a word beyond the ejaculations:

‘Jean!’

‘Nugent!’

Then she murmured something about going to look for aunt Maria, and turned towards the door. He tried to remember that he had no right to detain her—that she had every reason to wish to avoid him; but, as she neared the door, he forgot everything but that she was going, and in a moment was by her side.

‘Say you forgive me, Jean—say it!’ His eyes fixed with miserable yearning upon her white face. It had grown so terribly thin and sorrowful since his love had shadowed her life. Forgetting to allow for the natural regret at her father’s death, he took upon himself all the blame for the change which he perceived in her.

‘Need I say it?’ she whispered; ‘Oh, Nugent, don’t you know?’

‘Child—Jean, Jean, I want the words,’ he ejaculated, hardly knowing what he said, in the terrible fear that she was slipping away from him; his eyes pleading for a little respite—only a few moments. But he presently overcame and went on gently: ‘No; do not say them; I have no right to ask it; no right to say anything more than God keep you, Jean—Miss Raymond.’

‘You must not call me that. Haven’t you heard? My name is Jean Bell. My mother—my dear mother’ (Jean’s sympathy had of late leaned more towards the mother who had been wronged, than the father who had wronged her) ‘was not married to Mr. Raymond, and people don’t like me so well because of it.’ Was not Maude constantly telling her they did not, and was she not obliged to keep out of the way when visitors came on that account?

He uttered a short bitter laugh at the respec-

tability which looked down upon what he would have bartered all he possessed to win. Blind—blind!

She looked wistfully at him; the revelation did not seem to have made any difference in him; his eyes were unmistakably telling her so, though he spoke not. She had judged him rightly then. She moved another step towards the door, then stood hesitating a moment. Would it be very wrong if she could only say a word or two, which he might be able by and bye to interpret into farewell as well as forgiveness? She knew it would be a last farewell. She held out her hand which was eagerly caught between both his own. He would not have dared to take it; but now!

‘Nugent, I want you to believe——’

‘Very confidential, I am sure, Miss Bell.’

He held Jean’s hand with a firmer hold. She had put it into his, and not a thousand Maudes could make him release it until Jean bade him.

‘I am afraid I am rather *de trop*,’ went on Maude, almost beside herself with passion.

‘No,’ replied Jean, with a look which asked him to release her hand, ‘I was only going to say good bye to Nugent, and I can do that now.’

‘Nugent, indeed!’

‘Good bye, Nugent,’ said Jean, in a faltering

voice (she knew what they did not, that it was her last good bye to him). 'When Maude is your wife, try to give her the belief that though I have loved you I have not wronged her,' looking up into his eyes with a steady light in her own.

How Maude's proud spirit chafed under the other's words. To owe anything to the girl who had wronged her! Say what she might, Jean had wronged her, and in the worst way one woman can wrong another! But for his standing there! But she mastered herself sufficiently to keep back the worst that rose to her lips and said coldly,

'Spare yourself the trouble of entering into further explanations, I beg, Miss Bell. I have the same objection to rhapsodical scenes which I used to have, although Mr. Orme's taste appears to have changed.'

Jean silently turned towards the door again. Nugent Orme opened it for her, bowing reverently as she passed out. Then he turned towards Maude again, and said gently and firmly (he did not know her yet, and looked upon what had taken place simply as a momentary and perhaps natural ebullition of feeling at finding Jean and himself together):

'You ought to know that it would be utterly impossible for Jean to be disloyal to the right, Maude. If I were capable of speaking to her as

I have no right to speak, you ought to know she would not listen.'

'A great deal may be expressed without speaking. But I do not think she could say more. When it comes to openly telling a man she loves him, a girl has ceased to care anything about appearances, loyal as she may be.'

A hot flush rose to his brow. 'Will you never understand her?'

'Are you sure that *you* do, Nugent?'

Shortly and decidedly he replied, 'We must for the future avoid any discussion upon that point, Maude. Indeed, I may not see you again for some time. It is my intention to travel for an indefinite time.' He waited a few moments. Would she say the few words which would set him free from the engagement? He had done his best—he had tried to keep faith with her; but after what had occurred when he had lost his self-control by Jean's side that day, he thought that no woman with any self-respect would desire to be his wife. She had the gravest reason for blaming him, and he was deeply sensible of having brought trouble upon her; but how could she still wish to become his wife?

But Maude said softly, 'I hope you will write often, as you promised, Nugent. When do you think of going?'

‘I don’t know.’

Perhaps both were equally glad that Mrs. Poynder came into the room at that moment, obliging them to enter upon a fresh topic. He very soon took his departure. Some Raystone callers came in, and he gladly seized the opportunity to make his escape; although he chafed under Maude’s leave-taking, which was a great deal more *empresé* than he considered necessary.

It was hard work for Maude and her mother to keep up appearances, and seem to listen with a well-bred air to the customary Raystone gossip, and both uttered a sigh of relief when the visitors at length rose to take leave.

‘Go at once and fetch the will, mamma; bring it down here and we can talk the matter over,’ said Maude, remembering that there was no fire in her mother’s room until later in the day. ‘Just throw something over it, not to attract attention, you know.’

‘Very well, dear,’ replied Mrs. Poynder in a depressed tone. Maude wanted to read the will before showing it to Jean, perhaps. They could only trust to Jean’s generosity now!

In two minutes she entered the room again with a white terrified face. ‘Oh, Maude, Maude!’

‘What’s the matter now?’ angrily asked Maude. Nothing worse could happen than the

finding of that wretched will. 'I do wish you would not be so excitable—What is it, mamma?'

'It's gone!'

'What—the will? Are you mad? Did not you lock it up as I bade you? Nonsense, you have overlooked it, of course!'

'Oh, Maude dear, I did put it in the desk; but I am afraid I forgot to lock it, and—and it's gone! Somebody must have taken it.'

'Did you ask if anyone had been in the room—did you *see* anybody?' ejaculated Maude, angrily shaking her mother in her excitement.

'Only——'

'Why can't you speak? Only whom?'

Dear Maude, it could not have been he. I'm sure Louis would not do such a——'

'Did you find him there?'

'I—he wanted to speak to me, and said he had only been there a few minutes.'

'Did you tell him what you missed?'

'No, dear, I came straight to you.'

'That's the only sensible thing you have done.' Maude reflected a few minutes, and then went on: 'Now take my advice, mamma. If you don't want a regular exposure, try to be quite silent about the will. Say not a word to Louis about it, and try to go on just as usual. Louis has at any rate relieved us of the responsibility, and taken the

consequences upon his own shoulders. We shall soon find out what he intends doing. But one thing is certain, he will not produce the will, and so long as he does not the property is yours. Now do try and exert a little self-control; if Louis does not choose to produce the will you can't convict your own son, you know. You *must* keep quiet, unless you wish to ruin him. Come, mamma; go and lie down for an hour, and try to make your appearance as usual at dinner. If I can meet her, surely you may.' As her mother went out of the room crushed and miserable under this last blow that had fallen upon her, Maude smiled pleasantly to herself, 'The very best thing that could have happened, and just at the right moment to spare me!'

To their great relief, Jean sent a message to her aunt pleading a headache, and begging to be excused appearing at dinner. Louis Poynder came hurrying in at the last moment, and his bearing, confused and ashamed to them, and hectoring to the servants, at once confirmed their suspicions. When the servants had quitted the room, he turned towards his mother, and avoiding his sister's eyes, said in a half-apologetic, half-defiant tone,

'I want you to give me a cheque for Thwaites, the tobacconist, Mother. I forgot his bill in the list

I made, and the fellow writes insolently. Hasn't heard of our luck, I suppose.'

The tears so near to poor Mrs. Poynder's eyes began to fall. 'I do not think that I can sign any more. Oh, Louis, you know I ought not to! Maude, dear, let us give it all up, and leave it to her to do what is right? She will be generous to us; I know she will!'

Louis lay back in his chair, his hands in his pockets, in an attitude of easy negligence, regarding his mother with an amused smile.

Maude rose, opened the door, looked into the hall to make sure there were no listeners, then returned to her seat, and said quietly,

'What do you say to mamma's proposal. Louis?'

'Give the property to Jean? Likely! Not your suggestion *this* time, eh, Maude? The Mater never got so Utopian an idea out of you.'

'But,' began Mrs. Poynder. 'Oh, Louis, if you would consent to——'

'Don't be absurd, mother! You can't be in earnest. As there was no will the money is ours in consequence of her illegitimacy, and if——'

'If there had been one?' asked Maude, softly.

'It would still be ours by right of the old man's promises—if we could get it. So you need have no scruples, mother. It's ours safe enough.'

Maude studied his face for a few moments ; then said with a quiet smile, 'Take Louis's advice, mamma, and have no further scruples. He knows more about it than we do, I think.'

'Much obliged for your good opinion,' he returned with a mock bow.

'Do not be *too* grateful. I only wished mamma to understand that you have taken the responsibility of deciding upon yourself.'

'All right!' And with unusual politeness he rose from his seat, and opened the door for his mother and sister to pass out.

'Hadn't I better go and see how dear Jean is now?' fidgeted Mrs. Poynder, when they got into the drawing-room again.

'There is no necessity ; you had much better keep where you are, mamma. I told Phœbe to take her some chicken and sherry, and she will be all the better for being left alone, whether her ailment is headache or temper.' For she felt that she must keep strict watch over her mother until she had got over her nervous fits, lest she should disclose the secret and ruin them all. At tea-time they sent a maid to enquire if Jean felt well enough to join them or preferred having some sent to her room. Maude was conscious that she would not have so far consulted Jean's wishes the day before. It was impossible just now to forget that the girl

was the rightful (or as she preferred to consider it wrongful) owner of the property, although Maude did not feel any less implacable towards her on that account.

The maid returned with the message that Miss Bell would be much obliged if they would allow her to have some tea sent up to her. Maude kept guard over her mother until she had seen her safely in bed, and even then took the precaution of softly locking the room door on the outside, and carrying away the key. Poor mamma was so weak! She must not be trusted alone with Jean until she could be better depended upon.

But the following morning no Jean appeared at the breakfast-table, and a servant despatched to summon her, returned with the intelligence that Miss Bell was not in her room.

‘Gone for a walk, perhaps,’ said Maude, afraid to indulge the hope which suddenly sprang up in her heart.

‘I do not know, ma’am; but here is a letter, which I found on the table addressed to my mistress.’

Maude snatched it from her hand, hurriedly glanced at the contents, and tossed it towards her mother with a look of triumph. ‘You can go, Phœbe.’ What it might be necessary to tell the servants could be told by-and-bye. Jean had

left Fernside. Her letter contained a few words of gratitude to her aunt for past kindness, and the statement that for the future she preferred living as she had been trained to live, by her own exertions, rather than take further advantage of her aunt's bounty; begging her to believe that the life she had chosen would be happiest for her. Until she procured a governess's situation she was going to a good friend who had promised her protection. She had taken as much clothes as she should need in her mother's trunk, and had fifteen pounds in money, so they need not have any anxiety about her. She ended her letter with love to them all, and entreaties that they would take no steps to find her.

‘A fortunate thing for us, is it not, mamma?’

‘Fortunate! Oh, Maude!’

‘Nonsense; she says she will be with a friend. Besides, we have no right to prevent her going if we had known she intended to go; she was not under our control. Don't be foolish, mamma. Cannot you see that it is the very best thing that could happen for us?’

‘I was thinking of *her*!’ sobbed out Mrs. Poynder.

‘You would show better taste if you thought a little more about those belonging to you. Such excessive sympathy for one who has acted as Jean has to me, is to say the least, in very bad taste.’

For she saw that she must take a high tone with her mother now.

‘I do not think she meant to wrong you, dear; indeed, I do not!’

‘Only yesterday she was making the most of a few moments’ opportunity to get up a scene with Nugent, and it’s no use telling me that she did not mean it!’ She put the letter into the fire, and went on. ‘Now, listen to me, mamma. She says she has gone with a friend, and——’

‘*To* a friend, wasn’t it, dear?’

‘*With*, mamma; and as she does not mention her friend’s sex, it is pretty certain not to be feminine.’

‘But—oh, Maude, you do not mean——’

‘Pray do not excite yourself so much. If you would only reflect a little, you might be able to think of *my* welfare as well as hers perhaps.’

At which Mrs. Poynder subsided into tears. An hour or two later when he came into the breakfast-room—Louis had become less than ever regular in his habits since their good fortune—Maude informed him of Jean’s flight.

‘Gone!’ he ejaculated, taking the news much more seriously than she had expected he would. ‘Has there been any quarrel? What have you done to drive her away?’

‘She has not been driven away. She left a letter for mamma, stating that she has gone off

with some friend with whom she will be perfectly happy, and it is pretty evident what sort of a friend he must be.'

He stared at her a moment, then burst into a short laugh. 'How some of you women can hate each other, and how blind you are to some things! Take my advice, and don't hint anything of that sort to Orme if you have any idea of trying it on with him again. Romantic little fool as she is, any man would tell you *that's* a thing she can't do—the worst man living would know that, and Orme would see your motive in a moment. Come, I'll bet what you like that she never said it was a "he" she had gone with. I dare say she said she had gone with a friend, and you put in the "he" now, didn't you, Miss Maude?'

'I am not accustomed to betting,' she replied, coldly. But she altered her tactics, nevertheless; and, in telling her "dear Miss Orme" of Jean's flight, merely said that it was a great surprise and regret to them. Everything had been done for her comfort; but poor Jean had always of late seemed restless and so to speak conscience-stricken.'

It was through his aunt that the news reached Nugent Orme, and it was through her that Maude knew how it had been received.

'My dear, if there were any such thing as

witchcraft in these days I should seriously believe that poor Nugent was under some evil spell. He behaved like a madman, walking about the room, and saying the most dreadful things: not even I escaped! Then he shut himself up in the library for the rest of the day, and started off to town the first thing this morning looking dreadfully ill. I feel sure he has an attack on his nerve tissues; but he wouldn't say a word beyond good-bye.'

'Gone!' ejaculated Maude, with a white face. 'Where?'

'James thinks to town. I suppose to look after the business whatever it is he has invested in. Why he should have gone into business I cannot conceive with his large income. His poor father was so very different!'

But Maude could not believe that it was business, as Miss Orme called it, which had taken him to town. He had explained to her that he was trying the experiment whether working men might be taught to help themselves in some better way than by striking. He had formed a society for granting loans to poor professional men and tradesmen in opposition to the loan offices, and invested his accumulated capital in it; but Maude knew that its success or non-success would only be to him so much experience gained for or against the scheme, and the money considered to be well

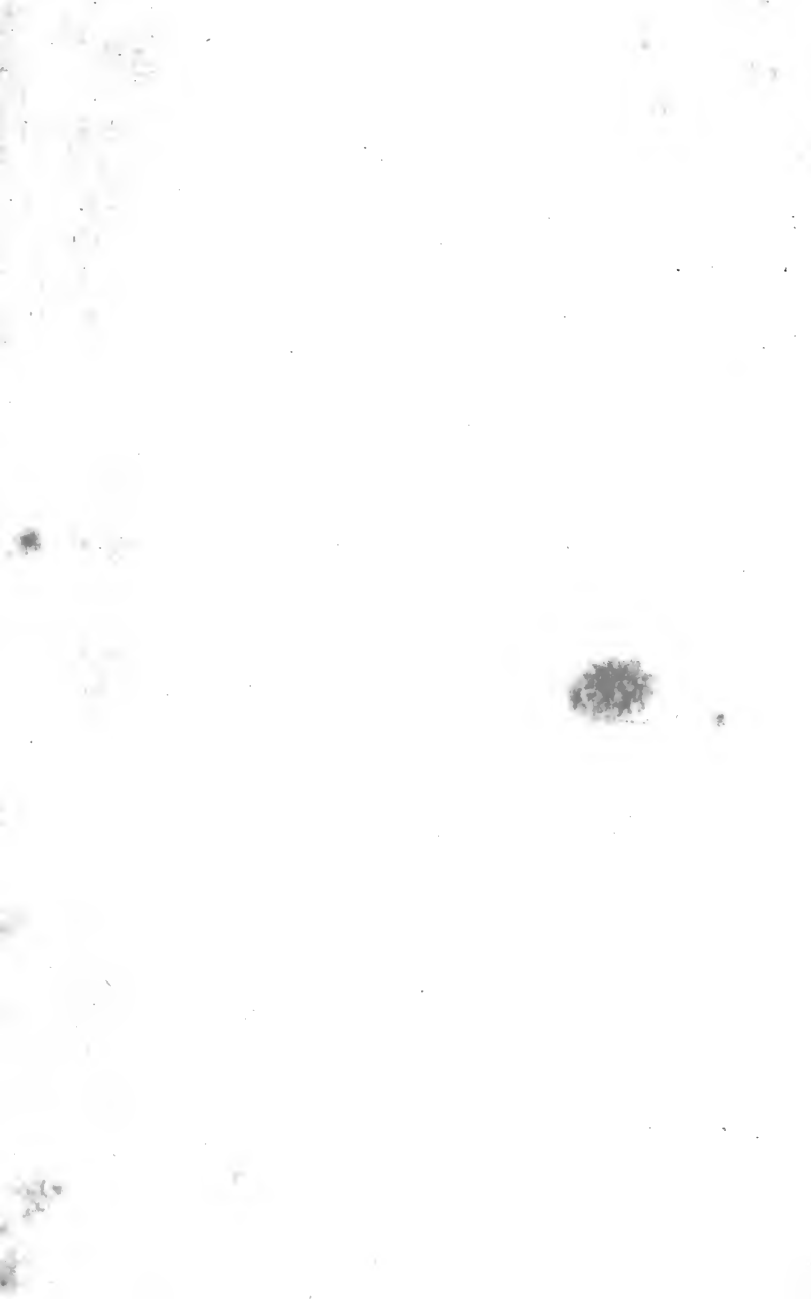
spent for that end. She was tormented with the fear that he had set forth in search of Jean.

But very soon Maude had worse than this to endure. Her mother's health suddenly gave way. Jean's abrupt departure, happening just at the crisis it did, and after a long series of anxieties, was a shock greater than Mrs. Poynder was able to bear. She sank into a low, desponding, hysterical state, from which neither reproaches nor entreaties seemed to have any power to rouse her—a state of mind which Maude found it almost impossible to cope with. She seemed to have lost her influence over her mother, beginning to find that she had quite lost her old tractability. Poor Mrs. Poynder could no longer be depended upon to say what she was told to say, and was apt to break out into self-accusations and wailings over Jean's departure before people, hinting about some wrong done. Some subtle change was working in her mind, to which Maude did not find the key until too late.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

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